



Strangest by peterqpan

Series: [Harringrove Works \[6\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: ACTUAL SEXYTIMES, Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Angst with a Happy Ending, Billy gets mind-slayered but he's got watchful friends, By the Power Of Hot Chocolate And Slow Friendship, Canon-Typical Violence, Fake/Pretend Relationship, Fix-It, Fixing that too, Getting all the bad stuff out of the way to work toward the good stuff, Hot Chocolate, Hurt/Comfort, I'M FIXING IT, Implied/Referenced Domestic Violence, Internalized Homophobia, M/M, Panic Attacks, Redemption, Slurs, They mostly just grouch around like wary cats, mentions of past pet death, suicide ideation

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Nancy Wheeler, Tommy H. (Stranger Things), Will Byers

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

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Summary:

In the wake of the Demogorgon, Steve is absolutely normal, relaxed, and fine in every way, though he has started keeping track of actions in his life a responsible adult would probably kill him for. One of those recurring actions is letting Billy Hargrove take over the corner of his couch.

'By the time they were halfway to Steve's house, Billy'd stopped yelling. Occasionally there'd be another kick. By the time Steve pulled in the garage, he was worried enough about exhaust fumes as

a new method of involuntary manslaughter he ran right around and banged on the trunk about six times. "Hargrove! William Whatever Hargrove, you answer me, say you're alive," he leaned against it, panting, feeling like he'd aged sixty years in body and vocabulary. The trunk thumped back, and Steve slid down to sit against it, reminding himself to breathe, which was apparently something he did now. He'd probably fail his remaining classes, trying to study while remembering to breathe. How would he hold down a job? He'd show up for the interview and have to say "I'm Steve Harrington, and sometimes I forget to breathe."

1. Pandora's trunk

Author's Note:

- For [Bavzel](#).

Notes for the Chapter:

Contains references to canon-typical violence, some slurs, and some ongoing anxiety over canon events. Details in end notes.

It totally made sense that Max would stay with Lucas and Dustin in the blanket fort that was taking over the living area of the Byers house. And of course El and Mike had laid claim to the table, where it looked like they were assembling crowns and helmets, of Will's design. Mrs. Byers and Hopper had taken over Adulthood, which was a relief, and Steve had ducked out amidst a general explosion of affectionate profanity and hair ruffling.

Through the window, Steve could see them tearing hot chocolate packets open—he watched Mrs. Byers teasing the kids with different mismatched mugs. He didn't really fit in there, he thought, in the blanket fort, or in the tense kitchen after the kids retreated to their realm. He definitely didn't belong wherever Jonathan and Nancy had disappeared to. It made sense for him to leave.

The fog had lifted, and he willed his shoulders to unclench, all the while trying to figure out the closest place to his bed to hide his bat. An evening project to keep him from thinking about his completely empty house. His house was also *fine*, he reminded himself, since he was not injured, or twelve years old, and had working light switches. *Logically*, it was over. His brain just wasn't catching up to breaking news.

He sat more heavily against his car, and it thumped back, which provoked an, again, *entirely logical* windmilling tumble as Steve tried to keep the bat and both eyes pointed at it all the while scrambling away on three limbs. After a moment of eye-burning terror, he recognized the pattern of sound as *kicking*, and a lot of things Max'

brother probably didn't need to be calling her, and he stood with a nervous spin, yanking his jacket straight. He took a breath and held it, rolling his shoulders as he looked back at the cheerily lit Byer's house with every light on, and back to the car bouncing with the booted feet slamming against the inside of the trunk. After several paced circuits of the car, Billy's voice had stopped threatening. He was laughing, slamming himself around in there, his voice getting higher. Steve scrabbled at his hair, sliding his hands down to cover his face. He really wasn't sure any kind of logic applied to Billy Hargrove.

If he let Billy out here, he might just run in there and Hopper would have to *shoot* him, in front of a *ton of little shitheads* who had barely escaped being eaten by monsters already. If he just...drove him to his *house*, and...and walked home, somebody would eventually let Billy out, and...*would* Max let him out?! Steve groaned to himself, long and slow, because if they were anything like Steve's parents, Billy Hargrove'd be no trouble to anyone ever again, after he *died* because nobody looked for him and *Steve Harrington knowingly left a human being in the trunk of a car*. Steve took a few deep breaths, idly walking back around to regard the open car window, and the keys on the seat.

He looked back at the house for one long hopeful moment, to see Hopper patting Joyce on the back as she threw weak punches into his shoulders, flailing before he caught her against his jacket. They swayed there in silhouette, their shoulders shaking. Steve sighed. He kicked the trunk. The thumping stopped, then exploded again, and Steve banged again. "Listen," he started, and the banging stopped again, for long enough that Steve thought it would have been better if he had something to say. "I didn't leave you in there, and I can't let you out—" the banging started again in earnest, along with a lot of "fuck"s, "bitch"s, and demands about Max—it was a good thing, Steve thought, grimacing, that Hopper'd put music on in the house. "Max is fine! She's inside—I'll let you out *somewhere else*, do you want me to take you home, or—" the thumping stopped, and Billy *yelled*.

"Where the *fuck* is that *freak*, I'll *kill* her, I'll *kill* you, you fucking—"

Steve banged the trunk again, and Billy pounded back, screaming

incoherently. “Mrs. Byers called your house, Max is staying over!” he tried, on the off-chance this could just suddenly turn into a normal, post-monster, partially kidnapped conversation. “I’LL TAKE YOU HOME, THEN,” he said loudly into the seam of the trunk, and Billy started struggling again.

“Max has to go *home*,” the muffled, furious voice yelled back, pounding and scraping at the inside of the trunk loudly enough that he was probably injuring himself, and Steve thought it was completely unfair the death threats were still audible. “I’ll be back here the second you open this *fucking trunk*, Harrington, I’ll drag her back by the *fucking hair*, I’ll tie it to my *car*, I’ll run over her *corpse*, I’ll drive through their *fucking house*—”

Peaceful options exhausted, Steve climbed in the car, leaning his face on the steering wheel as the car shook with Billy’s screaming fury, and took another deep breath. *Count on Steve Harrington to forget how to breathe*, he thought, *only been doing it for sixteen years. Only Steve Harrington wouldn’t have figured it out enough to let it run in the background.* By the time they were halfway to Steve’s house, Billy’d stopped yelling. Occasionally there’d be another kick. By the time Steve pulled in the garage, he was worried enough about exhaust fumes as a new method of involuntary manslaughter that he ran right around and banged on the trunk about six times.

“Hargrove! William Whatever Hargrove, you answer me, say you’re alive.” Steve leaned against it, panting, feeling like he’d aged sixty years in body and vocabulary. The trunk thumped back, and Steve slid down to sit against it, reminding himself to breathe, which was apparently something he did now. He’d probably fail his remaining classes, trying to study while remembering to breathe. How would he hold down a job? He’d show up for the interview and have to say “I’m Steve Harrington, and sometimes I forget to breathe.”

The trunk was silent again, and after a while getting his lungs some breathing practice again—maybe they’d take to it—Steve thumped it again. “We’re at my place. If I let you out and call for pizza will you please not kill anyone.” It came out tiredly even.

“What the fuck,” came from the trunk. “Gonna get the police here, tell ‘em I attacked you like a *psycho*, have your mommy and daddy

hold yo—”

Steve banged the heel of his hand on the trunk again. “Nobody else is here. Look, it’s pizza or trunk. We can figure this out in the morning. Promise you won’t do anything to Max.”

The banging in the trunk was taking on a rhythm, and Steve banged over it. “Fucker. Tell me you won’t rat Max out, I’ll let you out.” Billy began screaming lyrics to his beat, and Steve groaned, letting his head thunk against the trunk, before doing the math on how long Billy’d been in there, and how little he knew about the random syringe Max had shot him up with, and he opened the trunk. Billy’s ankles and wrists were duct-taped together, wedged in, and he swore roundly as he tried to cover his face. “Come on,” Steve sighed, standing to the side where he hoped he was out of range, but reaching over to rip the duct tape off Billy’s ankles. Billy was laughing, inexplicably, holding his arms over his face.

Steve sighed. “Can you walk.”



<https://platypanthewriter.tumblr.com/post/658836641173127168/woohoo-cars-curls-smirk-thanks-so-much>

“Anyway you want, Princess,” Billy giggled.

“Come on,” Steve stood over by the door, arms crossed as he watched Billy kick a bit out the side of the trunk, then get himself rolled sideways. He scrabbled before landing on the cement with a thud, and lay there, laughing harder. It was starting to sound growly again, and Steve rethought his impulse to offer help. “I’m getting pepperoni. With olives.”

When Billy finally staggered in from the garage, Steve had called for the pizza. He turned to see the door slam shut, and Billy slide down

it, gnawing at the duct tape around his wrists. His hands were purple.

Steve slammed a few kitchen drawers and stalked over with the carving knife, and Billy went very still, watching him crouch, and allowing him to pull the duct tape close enough to slide the knife up underneath. When Steve finished slicing, he tossed the knife behind him at random, grabbing one purple hand and rubbing it until it felt like a hand again and not a dissection frog. "Jesus. Max thought you were gonna kill me. And Lucas. Don't sell her out."

Billy drew a shaky breath. "And you're not gonna tell your fancy lawyer dad I broke your face."

"...my dad's not a lawyer," Steve frowned at him, "—Hopper'd probably have locked you up." He placed the warmed hand on Billy's knee, and moved on to rub life back into the other one.

"So I behave," Billy sneered. "Be a good little *cunt*."

"Wish the fucking *pizza* would get here," Steve muttered, stalking out to the living room, and sinking down against the arm of the couch that let him see the whole living room, kitchen, and stairs. He stared out the windows to the pool, watching for demodogs.

When the pizzas arrived, his kidnapping victim shoved by him to drop into that favored spot on the couch, and Steve sighed.

In the morning, Steve called Max, and she agreed to Billy picking her up for a ride home. After he left, tromping off through the snow, Steve stood in his silent house getting a little more breathing practice in as his vision started to haze around the edges, thinking of all the things Billy Hargrove *wasn't*, like an underground tunneler, or a demogorgon. Billy Hargrove was from *Risky Business*, not *Alien*. He was the sweaty "enhanced human" Khan. Steve forgot about his breathing regimen entirely as he imagined Billy Hargrove in the cast from *Grease*, and laughed 'til he choked. Shaking his head, he leaned back against the door, and rubbed his face. All day at school when his brain started to remind him of the previous week, he'd imagine

Billy Hargrove as Danny Zuko, shimmying down his Camaro with Tommy behind him trying to carry a tune.

Hopper called the next day, to tell him that Mr. Hargrove had called the cops the last two nights on Billy driving around at night, and they'd escorted him home from close to Steve's house. "In case he ran somebody over drunk. I hear stuff, kid." The doubt came clearly through his voice. "I don't know that he's headin' for you, but I don't know that he's *not*." Steve took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, completing the line for himself—*maybe keep that bat handy*.

"Thanks, Hopper," he tried the nickname aloud.

Hopper huffed a laugh and hung up.

Billy Hargrove was back at Steve's house three nights later, serenading under his window. Steve looked longingly at his ski boots, but lifted the sash without projectiles in hand. "What the hell," he shouted back.

"Lemme in or I'll tell my dad you offer rides to Max all the time!" Billy yelled up. "Alone!"

Steve, who had gone to an in-class-only new sleeping schedule, suddenly wished his vocal cords could produce the earsplitting rage screeches from Ghostbusters, but let his head thud against the glass in surrender before he went down and unlocked the door. "The fuck do you want, Hargrove," he squinted up at the moon. "Are you a werewolf, is this where I die."

Later, he'd think, that moment would have been the time to call Hopper.

Billy shouldered him aside as he opened the door, cigarette in hand and reeking of sweat, cologne, beer, and...cooking sherry? It was both reminiscent of and an improvement on Steve's great-aunt, who usually smelled like baby powder, cat pee, and creme de menthe. Steve's lungs apparently appreciated it, because they decided to do their job for once without his constantly reminding them. He

scrabbled angrily at his hair, before tromping into the kitchen to start making some Folger's. When the microwave beeped, he stirred in about half the remaining jar of crystals, and went to see why there was no noise happening anywhere.

The couch was covered in Violent Highschool Stranger, under a blanket. Steve dropped into a chair, watching the knee-lumps and elbow-lump stay very still. He wondered whether he'd sleep better upstairs with an unpredictable problem on the couch, and whether suggesting a movie would get his face beaten in—with admirable calm, he thought. He also thought of not living alone—having a mom like Mrs. Byers, or a sister like Nancy, and imagined what they'd do if they came in and saw he'd brought *Billy Hargrove*, the guy who almost beat him to death, into his house—*twice*. They'd probably murder him, he thought, and then murder Billy. And then him again—this had to be at least a three-murder event on the Stupidity Scale. Hopper would probably have even more to say. It was a strangely comforting thought, except they weren't here, and Billy Hargrove was.

He didn't seem to want to break Steve's nose again, but then he hadn't given that much warning the first time, either.

Between Steve's new not-sleeping regime and thinking about the Byer's ceiling, map taped everywhere, and Billy's fists hitting his face, the world had just started to tilt a bit when the blanket said "Take a picture, *Princess*, you can jack off to it at night," and Steve lifted his coffee stew and breathed in the smell.

"What didja *think* I did with that blanket," he tried, and watched it get flung as Billy scrambled as far from it as possible, thudding onto his back off the side of the couch, and Steve realized he was laughing again, wheezing with his hand against his face. When he finally looked up, Billy was brushing himself off, straightening his jacket, and Steve imagined the look on his own face after his trunk had thumped back. "Nah, I didn't." He patted his lip where the grin had stretched it, glancing down to check for blood. "Much." When Billy's hackles raised further, Steve shouted over his rising glower. "How about *Star Wars*?"

"Hell is wrong with you," Billy muttered, but settled in the corner of

the couch, apparently waiting for Steve to set up the movie. By the time C-3P0 was trying to get to Obi-Wan, Billy'd passed out against the arm, his boots tucked up between the cushions. The smell of cooking sherry intensified, and the glint Steve noticed against the black leather and laces proved to be a hunk of broken glass. There was more in the boot treads, and he could see a couple very small pieces caught in Billy's shirt and hair. It was hard not to imagine the bank-robbing explosion Billy Hargrove would be walking away from, but his car was parked right out front, hard to miss, if the cops were looking for him. Steve had never seen a SWAT team. Count on them to miss out on *actual monsters* and chase Billy Hargrove to his house, he thought, indignantly sleepy, and shivered awake hours later, to fogging breath and the white noise of the TV. He groaned, leaning forward to flap one arm at the remote, and switched off the TV. In the dark, he realized the slight rasp of Billy's breathing had stopped.

"...don't *die* on my *couch*," he mumbled, frowning into the darkness, which remained dark, but the normal, fridge-humming kind of dark, not the strange blue fluttering darkness where Dustin had screamed. He breathed in stale cigarette smoke and cooking sherry.

Billy snorted. "Just for you."

He was back in the safer kind of movie, then, Steve thought muzzily. Just kids, having sleepovers. There were movies where killers interrupted sleepovers, but they were humans, not monsters, and anyway he was not actually having a slumber party with Billy Hargrove: Probable Bank Robber. He felt around next to the couch for the blanket, and pulled it clumsily over them.

It occurred to him he hadn't actually asked. "Sooooo...you rob a bank?" he tried, keeping it casual.

"Sure did," Billy scoffed, "—shot four guys, too. And there's a stolen police car out there."

"Oh, it's *that* kind of movie." Steve squirmed down against the back of the couch, letting his head fall against his arms in the safe darkness. The blanket fell over his face.

"You're not going to call the cops and tell them you've got a *bank*

robber?" Billy kicked him, and Steve batted weakly at his foot, eyes sliding shut again.

"Watch it, you—broken glass...shoe."

He woke to the fading smell of cooking sherry, and blinked slowly at the ceiling, the sudden deep sleep disorienting after he'd thought he'd never sleep again outside of Biology class. "...wha—um," he muttered, scrambling to look around. There was no sign of his home invader. He wondered how many murders "falling asleep with Billy 'bank punching' Hargrove a foot away" rated on the Idiot Scale, he had to be up to, oh, at least four. He felt a weird temptation to ask Nancy before first period, and fiddled with his locker, considering it. The line between her brows deepened, and probably became downright thunderous as he grinned awkwardly at she and Jonathan, turned on his heel, and walked off.

That day after basketball, in the showers, Tommy guffawed at the hand-shaped bruises on Billy's upper arms. "Where were *you* last night? *All night long*, huh?" Tommy asked, leering and hugging himself with long groans and grunting noises, and before Steve could catch himself, words fell out of his mouth.

"Those hands are huge, though, is your girlfriend Sylvester Stallone or—" he yelped as Billy shoved him against the wall, grin manic.

"What you trying to say, *pretty boy King Steve*?"

"I think he's calling you a—" Tommy smacked the wall and showerhead on his way to the floor as Billy shoved his face. "A fucking *faggot*," Tommy yelled triumphantly, from the floor, as Steve wondered why he was allowed to open his mouth, ever, at all, and Billy tried to swing around and punch him and almost fell on his ass.

"It was my fucking *dad*, okay, it's no big deal. My *dad*," Billy was screaming between them, waving his fists as they both dodged around, until the teacher and half the class shoved their way in and pulled him back.

Steve fled. He dressed wondering how many more deserved Stupidity Murders he'd earned, getting in the communal shower with the guy who'd beaten his face in, and then opening his dumb fuckhead mouth and suggesting he'd had sex with *Rambo*. Nancy was in the hall listening to Billy yelling inside when Steve ducked out of the locker room with his pants on but half his head still soapy, and she helped him rinse his hair in the drinking fountain.

"I think you and Hopper and Jonathan's mom need to murder me about eleven times," he told her, laughing, as he wiped water from his eyes. "I think I just asked Hargrove if he was gay. In the *shower*." Her mouth fell open.

"Uh," her eyebrows drew together as she looked at the locker room, but her mouth quirked, "—should we be running, then?"

"I probably should carry my bat," he laughed, feeling around his ears one more time for soap, then grimacing and digging around in his bag for a sweaty gym shirt to rub on his head. When he pulled it out, she looked even more disgusted than he felt.

"I've got dry clothes in my locker. You can at least use a *clean* shirt." She stuck her tongue out, trotting confidently off. "Bleah."

Steve's unfriendly neighborhood home invader didn't reappear for over a week, but falling asleep to movies apparently worked, so he re-watched the beginnings of *Rambo*, *Tron*, and *The Last Unicorn*, discovered he could not fall asleep to *Monty Python*, and bought a much larger jar of Folger's Instant Coffee for mornings when even the dulcet tones of *Winnie the Pooh* hadn't let his lungs work through the night without reminder.

The next time Billy showed up he just banged on the door, startling Steve out of the haze he'd fallen into during a *Secret of NIMH* song. Steve groaned, flapped unproductively at the remote to stop the animated mice, and then stumbled to his feet to make the door-abuse stop. The pounding continued through his shouted "I'm coming! I'm coming!" until Billy Hargrove nearly fell in on top of him, half naked, one leg bare, and began hopping into the other half of his jeans.

“...what the hell.” Steve stared.

“What the fuck is that noise.” Billy scrambled to pull his jacket on, shivering, and nearly elbowed Steve in the face.

“...uh, it’s, um, mice?” Steve blinked at Billy’s purpling face, which looked like it needed some frozen peas. “Uh. Lemme get you some frozen peas.” Billy tried to slam by him as usual, but Steve wasn’t good at basketball for nothing, and slid by the predictable motion on the way to the freezer. He tossed over the peas, proudly not adding to his Stupidity Gauge by getting within five feet of the half-naked feral in his kitchen. It seemed unlikely Billy had accused anyone of having sex with Sylvester Stallone in a communal shower, but the parallels to his Eleven On The Stupidity Murder Scale day were hard to discount. The shiner he was sporting looked exactly like Steve would have gotten if he hadn’t escaped from the shower to the hallway. *Focus*, he thought.

“Make me some of that coffee,” Billy was shivering, glaring at the peas. If Billy’d been anyone else, Steve would have teasingly explained how to press frozen peas against a black eye, but given their last interaction, he just let his lips thin.

“Hot chocolate?” he offered. “I’ve got marshmallows.”

The furious disbelief Billy had focused on the peas turned to Steve’s face, amplified. “Did you just offer me marshmallows.”

“I *have* some,” Steve sighed, taking down his blue mug, and one that said Happy Anniversary. After a pause, he returned the anniversary mug to the cupboard, and grabbed one with a robin on it, filled them both with water, and stuck the robin in the microwave.

“Marshmallows.”

“Look, if you don’t like marshmallows, don’t eat any.” He pulled out the bag, the Swiss Miss, and the instant coffee.

“*Rainbow* marshmallows,” Billy observed scornfully. “You’re girlier than *Max*.”

“Everyone’s girlier than Max, except Hopper and Mrs. Byers,” Steve

sighed. "Coffee or chocolate. I mix them sometimes."

"You *rebel*," Billy snorted. "Gimme some marshmallows. You call the Sheriff 'Hopper'?" He held out a hand, finally lifting the other to his face, and wincing as he placed the peas against the swelling bruise. Steve had seen enough marshmallow bags absconded with to just drop some in the outstretched hand, the bag protectively at his side. He watched Billy start to drop the whole handful in his mouth, wince as he tried to open his mouth wide, and begin eating one at a time. "...kinda got to know him," Steve said. "Me and El and the, y'know," he held his hand at waist level, picturing Dustin's indignant protest, "Muppet babies."

"Yeah, how'd *that* happen?"

Steve reminded himself to breathe. "Barb died. Bob died. You should be careful, you've got a 'b' name." He turned away as the microwave beeped.

"What." Billy's eyes narrowed.

"Is it raining?" Steve asked. "Why are you all wet?"

"Fuck off," Billy said around his mouthful of marshmallows, and Steve shrugged, presenting the steaming mug, a spoon, the box of chocolate mix, and the Folger's.

"I give you the bird," he said grandly, tossing his own mug in the microwave.

Billy snorted, dumping three chocolate packets in the mug, and making grabby hands for the marshmallows.

Steve surrendered the bag, leaning against the counter by the microwave. He watched Billy wipe the water away that was trickling down his neck, and try to pretend he wasn't shaking, dripping wet, in November. Steve stomped off for a towel, returning to throw it to Billy just before the microwave beeped. "Gimme back those girly marshmallows," Steve said, and began dumping powders in his mug, stirring industriously, before topping it with a pile of rainbow.

Billy stalked off to take Steve's spot on the couch, before sliding off to

flip through the laserdiscs. "Gonna punch these mice," he muttered, lifting one, and flipped it to read the back. "You have movies for grownups? Whaddaya do when there aren't, like, singing frogs, you just fall asleep or—?"

"Oh no, not that one," Steve breathed, horrified. "That's Nancy's, it gave me *nightmares*."

"...IRA bombers?" Billy frowned up incredulously.

"No! It's a romance, it's *awful*, the guy falls in love with the girl and she has a dick and she thought he KNEW—"

"What," Billy's voice had gone flat.

"That night I dreamt I was in bed with Nancy for the first time and she took my clothes off and I was dickless with a secret pussy—"

"Everyone knows that, Harrington—"

"Shut your face, it was horrible, she just kept patting my hand sadly and she's a *problem solver*, you know, she kept going to the kitchen and getting, like, a banana, and the pepper grinder—"

The laserdisc sleeve drummed softly at Billy's head as he shook with laughter.

"And she just looked more and more disappointed and finally she said she had to leave, she couldn't cope with a relationship where she had to satisfy herself with a garlic press, and she was sure I'd be happier moving on—" Steve had been laughing too, at the image of Nancy earnestly presenting him with carnally unsatisfactory kitchen gadgets, but he sighed, rubbing his face. "Usually when I dreamed she'd dump me it was because I was invisible, or she was the president and she caught me setting up a kegstand in the—"

"I'm gonna call you 'Secret Pussy' forever," Billy interrupted.

"You will the hell not—"

"What?!" Billy laughed harder.

"I'm not a secret pussy, I'm secretly Kurt Russell, all my..." Steve slid further down in the couch, curling around his snickers, "—ten out of ten trick-or-treaters agree."

"You telling me you're half-blind, because it'd explain—"

Just then, the doorbell rang, over and over like a blaring red alert, along with voices and the thump of bicycles against the side of the house.

Steve scrambled up to reach the entryway before Dustin, Mike, and Will all fell in at once. "We need hot chocolate," Dustin said confidently, and Steve grimaced, thinking fast, before inwardly throwing his hands up and outwardly yelling "BILLY! Put on the kettle for hot chocolate!"

Silence fell, all three kids going still, but after a few seconds the couch creaked, and Billy walked into the kitchen, and the sink turned on.

"Is he holding you hostage," Dustin whispered, eyes wide as he leaned around Steve's shoulders.

"He's probably eating marshmallows." Steve raised his eyebrows at them, wondering whether it was stupid or just evil to allow the kids around Billy, who'd settled in, in a weird way, but also probably *bit* occasionally. Unprompted. He didn't want any of his stupidity murders to be because someone got actually murdered.

"Will came for a sleepover," Mike reported, glancing into the kitchen warily. "And we were gaming, and it was fine, but then there was a short in the kitchen and sparks and—"

Will sniffled, rubbing his eyes with his sleeve. "I can't call my *mom*," he rolled his thin shoulders back, firming his chin as he looked up at Steve, "—she'll never let me out *again* if I freak out—"

"He started crying all crazy," Dustin put in, ever helpful, to a general elbowing, "—and *I* said, Steve has hot chocolate, and a bat."

"...ah," Steve glanced at the kitchen. "Did you guys let her know you were coming here? So she doesn't call and find you gone—"

"We called," Mike laughed apologetically. "We said you invited us over."

Billy tromped back out to the living room, presumably to sneer at singing mice, as Steve herded the tiny assholes towards hot chocolate.

"*Why is he here*," Dustin whispered, very loudly, with his usual degree of subtlety. Mike and Will nodded, and Steve laughed, rubbing his face.

"It's *fine*, we have classes together, he's not going to do anything," Steve tried weakly, and Will's eyes narrowed.

"Do you need a distraction while we phone Hopper?" he asked softly under the noise of Steve getting more mugs and batting Dustin away from stress-eating all the marshmallows.

"Dustin could get your bat," Mike suggested.

"Thanks, man, send *Dustin* out there," Dustin sighed loudly.

"Dustin, get more marshmallows out of the garage," Steve pointed, trying to channel Nancy's no-nonsense tones. He flipped the stove off, opting for the hot chocolate prep that kept them all in the kitchen for a longer time. "Will, fill these up and microwave them one by one for two and a half minutes. Mike—" he glanced around, "—get spoons and see if there's still whipped cream in the fridge."

They slowly moved to obey, watching him closely as he began rifling the cupboard for candy canes. Steve vindictively didn't point out the spoon drawer to Mike. It was one thing, he thought, expecting his stupidity assessments from Hopper or Nancy, but he was not having it from *children* that did things like try to raise *demodogs* in *turtle cages*.

Billy had settled in Steve's spot on the couch, as always—Steve rolled his eyes—and Steve headed for the other end, before noticing the kids standing in strained poses like awkward chainsaw art. "Ugh," Steve sighed, before dropping next to Billy, whose shoulders hunched around his hot chocolate.

"Okay, Will, you pick," Steve pointed.

"Pick this, Will," Dustin held up the animated *Lord of the Rings*.

"Shut up, Dustin," Mike threw a pillow at him, and Will yelped, dodging aside, before grabbing it and swiping Dustin.

Steve grinned. "I found the candy canes," he told Billy, who turned another disbelieving look on him, as Will smacked Mike with a pillow, and it turned into a free-for-all between the three of them until Dustin crawled under the melee and put on *The Hobbit*. As soon as it loaded up, he plonked himself down next to Steve. Will sat cautiously next to him, and Mike dropped at the end, the quieter two studying their chocolate as Dustin elbowed Steve.

"Man, I been *wanting* to watch these without Lucas, he *hates* Return of the King—"

Mike grimaced over towards Billy at the sound of Lucas' name. "Well, it is kinda silly. It's for little kids."

"It's for Steve. He has to have the singing in there," Billy put in, and Dustin leaned around to stare at him.

"You're another reason I'm glad Lucas ain't here, man, you a Nazi or what?"

"Neo Nazi," Mike corrected quietly. "They're called Neo Nazis, it's not 1945—"

"Look, it's Hobbiton," Steve sighed into his mug.

"Or the Ku Klux Klan," Will put in, "Like in the South."

"No," Billy said finally, and after several seconds Dustin laughed.

"No?! No, you just slammed him into a wall? No, you just told Max to stay away from his kind?"

"I didn't say that," Billy muttered.

Steve could feel Billy's entire body going tense, and shut his eyes,

breathing in the blended chocolate, coffee, and candy cane smells from his mug. Twelve murders worth of stupidity, today, he thought, wondering whether he'd make it to the phone before Billy lashed out, and whether one of the kids would save him with the bat, and whether any of his Idiocy Tally would hit them, in a permanent sense.

"Why'd you beat him up, then?" Mike asked pointedly. Eleven's boyfriend felt no physical fear, apparently. Reasonable, if Eleven were actually *present*.

"Okay," Steve tried to think of what Mrs. Byers would say, "—uh, whatever reasons he had, they weren't good enough, can we all say 'aye' on that one?"

"Aye!" proclaimed Dustin and Mike in a shout, Will firmly, and, thankfully, Billy, sounding a little rough.

"And unless he does it again, it's between he, Lucas, and Max?" Steve continued, pushing his luck.

"Aaaaye," came the sullen chorus from Steve's right, and a fervent "Aye," in low tones from Billy.

Steve sat back, wide-eyed, as his heart slowly stopped pounding. An hour later, his head was draped back over the couch as he snored softly, and Mike had quietly left and returned to drop the bat full of nails across the coffee table. Dustin pointed at it, speaking in his louder-than-speech stage whisper.

"That's Steve's bat. Look, it's got *blood* on it. That's *bully* blood." He grabbed it and pointed it at Billy, who slammed his elbow into Steve.

"Harrington. *Harrington*. Is that blood on that bat." Steve tried to roll sideways, growling, but Billy elbowed him in his chest, this time. "*Harrington*. Did you *kill someone*." He glared around. "Did you guys cover up a *murder*?"

Notes for the Chapter:

Billy gets bruised up offscreen, and gets vocally

angry when something Steve says seems to imply he's gay. He does not have good opinions on women or gay people. Steve is fighting off panic attacks for most of the chapter.

Thank you so much for wandering in! Lemme know if you liked my story--I lovelovelove hearing from people! Kudos! Short comments! Long comments! Questions! Constructive criticism! Comments as extra kudos! Thanks so, so much! XD

(I try to reply to each one, but if you don't want a response to your comment then please say "No reply please" or "Whisper" so I'll know not to reply.)

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2. Fractionally gay

Summary for the Chapter:

Steve avoids explaining that he and the little shitheads were besieged in a school bus, and fixates a bit on hot chocolate.

Notes for the Chapter:

I intended to get some chapters of actual romantic stuff up for Valentine's Day, but have these assholes yelling at each other instead.

Billy is still Billy, so, like, canon-typical internalized homophobia and slurs, details in end-notes if you need to check up on that.

As Steve was laughing at Billy's horror over the bat, his lungs starting to clench at the impossibility of explaining, the phone rang. He batted Mike aside and swung his leg over the back of the couch—any effort was worthwhile to forestall certain conversations.

“Steve,” the small voice came through raspy, and it took him a second to place it.

“Max?”

Billy's head popped up like a meerkat's.

“Billy ran out screaming. Lucas said I should warn you.” She gulped, difficult to understand through the rapid breathing. “You—you better call Hopper, Steve, he might—”

“He's just sitting here drinking hot chocolate, Max,” he hurried to reassure her, wincing as Billy stumbled back over the arm of the couch towards the wall, smacking his hand down for the bat as he moved. Will kicked it out of his reach, and Billy winced as his shoulderblades thudded against the wall.

Max was breathing slowly—consciously, Steve thought, maybe he wasn't the only one whose body had forgotten how. "He's what," she asked, voice flat.

"He show...he shows up here, sometimes," he closed his eyes, feeling the Judgemental Adolescent Brigade's attention shift from Billy to him with laser focus, "—it's fine. I mean, he's still an asshole, but he hasn't done anything. He—" Steve stopped himself before telling a middle-school girl her delinquent brother's semi-alcoholic cigarette funk was more grounding than a lightning rod. "...are *you* okay?"

"Me and Lucas are fine." She swallowed hard again, and Steve waited patiently. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "He might've...broken something. His, um. His dad said he fell down the stairs, but he'd just got in the shower. He wouldn't be trying to get laundry or anything. He totally wanders around in his underwear if he forgets pants, Steve, he wasn't hurrying to get anywhere," she scoffed, and Steve frowned over to where Billy was still leaning against the wall, now casual, the bruised side of his face turned away from the room. "I think he, uh. I—I think he slammed him into a few other things. The tub makes a noise."

"You gonna call 'Hopper' on me?" Billy bared his teeth, staring at the bat, and Mike crouched, reaching for it.

"Whoa, whoa, hang on, Max," Steve pressed the phone to his chest. "Dustin. Put the bat, uh, with the skis, y'know—" He waved vaguely, hoping to convey the bat's location to everyone but Billy. "Billy, if you're gonna hit anything, uh. Go upstairs and punch a pillow or something. My room's plaid."

"So plaid," Dustin confirmed, proud of his insider information.

"I think we should go," Will whispered, and Mike slid an arm around him, baring his teeth right back at Billy.

"And leave him here with Steve? We should call Hopper."

Billy snorted, but gave them a wide berth on his way to the kitchen, where he pointedly loitered for a while, reminding Steve of nothing so much as a cat who doesn't want to admit anyone else has a good

idea. The stairs creaked under his rapid footsteps as Dustin returned, then spun in place. "Where the hell is he?! Did you kill him?!"

"He went upstairs," Will whispered back, frowning up at the sound of a creaking hallway.

"Max," Steve tried to ignore the whispered conference behind him, "—he seems fine, but I'll check later. Glad you have a date night, or every little shithead I know would be here. Why don't you guys ever just show up to sell *cookies*?" He frowned accusingly at Mike, who frowned back.

"I just don't want the stupid shit *dying in your house*," Max grumbled, and Steve found himself grinning again into the handset.

"It's okay, we've got a shovel." He rubbed his face.

She snorted. "Are you sure I shouldn't call Hopper? I mean he might...set you on fire, or...fuck your mom."

"...what a resume," Steve sighed, trying not to just sit on the floor and laugh, or possibly cry. His lungs were ready to heave, but undecided. "He's not doing anything, yet. If he, uh, if he sets my mom on fire, I'll definitely let you know."

"Does Steve *have* a mom?" Steve heard Mike asking Dustin.

In his ear, Max took a shaky breath. "...okay. Okay. Are...are you *sure* we shouldn't come over? I can steal my mom's car."

"No!" Steve barked. "No! It's fine! You definitely don't have to get *arrested* to come protect me, holy shit. Go...watch *My Little Pony* or something. Or hey, watch something for *you*, screw what Lucas wants." That brought grins to Dustin, Mike, and Will's faces, and he heard Max relaying it to a shouting Lucas over the phone. "Okay. I'm—I'm gonna hang up. It's fine. If anything happens, I *promise* I'll call Hopper."

"Yeah, you better." The connection clicked over to dial tone.

"...if we keep watching, it'll show us how to kill the *Nazgul* Steve's got in his *bedroom*," Dustin sing-songed, grinning, and Steve sighed.

“Yeah. Sure. I need more—” the kettle shrieked again—Billy must have switched it on again, after Steve had chosen to busy his invaders with the microwave instead of allowing conversation. He frowned as he flicked it off, but no stairs creaked, so he figured it was to be obnoxious, rather than a need for more hot chocolate. “...I need more hot chocolate,” Steve admitted.

So did they all. Steve surveyed the Hot Chocolate Cupboard—the only cupboard he used, the only one that wasn’t a bit dusty—and couldn’t really think of much else he could buy. *I could fill up the garage*, he thought, thinking of the ease of routine in the grocery store, filling an entire cart with marshmallows, and the reassurance of a shelf of them every time he parked his car. *I’ll have to stockpile candy canes*, he thought with a snort, his intestines doing a crampy clench at the idea of running out in mid-February, and having some kind of breathing emergency that required them. *They’ll find me blue in the kitchen*, he thought, muffling his snickers against the sleeve of his forearm, *after I collapse because my hot chocolate isn’t right, and my lungs turn into inflexible plastic soda bottles, and Billy isn’t around to bitch about singing mice*.

“...Steve?” Dustin’s voice trailed in from the front room over the sound of goblins, and Steve wiped his eyes, sniffing.

“Be right there.”

Another hour in, and Steve had jerked awake nearly every ten minutes to the sound of Dustin’s voice, so he stood, stretching. Dustin crawled forward to pause the VCR when Steve walked into the kitchen.

“Go ahead,” he leaned back into the front room, “I’m beat. I’m going to go sleep upstairs.” On his way, he refilled his hot chocolate, and grabbed another, crouching to make sure they didn’t foam up over the sides, that there were equal piles of marshmallows, and that his was actually mostly coffee.

He didn’t see the exchange of wide-eyed glances.

The lights were off in his room, and the hallway light shone across Billy's defined abs where he was sprawled across Steve's bed. Steve kicked his way through a pile of shoes on his way to the desk lamp.

"What the hell," Billy groaned, covering his face with his arms.

"I brought more hot chocolate, I guess," Steve shrugged, rattling around in his desk drawers. "I told Max I'd make sure you weren't broken anywhere, or anything." He thumped the first aid kit on his desk. It still had smears of blood on it.

Billy snorted. "The hell did she tell you."

Steve opened his mouth to ask about the hand-shaped bruises he'd compared to Sylvester Stallone's, closed it again, and shrugged. "Sounds like your dad's an asshole." Billy flinched, then tried to cover it with a luxurious stretch.

"Breaking news."

"Come on, sit up, dickhead, let me check out your face."

"You just wanna check me out," Billy bared his teeth in a wide smile, leaning in like Steve was somebody he was about to ask to Makeout Point.

"Um—" Steve leaned away so fast his head hit the wall, and Billy cackled, curling on to his side on the bed in a fit of the giggles.

"Y'don't want a blow job, *Harrington*? Are you sure? You're being *awfully*," his mouth quirked into a crooked grin, "—fucking. *Sweet* to me. You had me *wait in your bed*."

Steve sighed, rubbing his face. There was probably some scientific name for something just difficult enough to keep your mind off worse things. Nancy would know. Maybe he could switch to a different awful thing to keep the nightmares away. Alcohol would probably work, but the idea of being drunk and not noticing the motion detector lights coming on all around the house—he grabbed at the hot chocolate, slopping it on his math homework, but feeling the heat ease into his palms.

The marshmallows were sweet foam, almost entirely melted, and he sipped slowly, licking the sugar off his lips. After Max' phone call, he couldn't just kick Billy out—*that's almost worse than the trunk*, he thought, *sending him back to somebody who slams his head into the side of the tub*. He could put the kids in his parent's room, he decided, then imagined them wandering off to poke Billy in the night, ending with Billy a snarling silhouette at the treeline, dragging a bleeding child away, red spray against the snow and trees, and dripping blood from his mouthful of soft belly. He sighed, closing his eyes. When he opened them again, Billy had gone very still.

"...you gonna get your bat, King Steve?" he whispered.

"I'm not going to hit anybody with a nailbat," Steve opened the first aid box, counting off breaths in his head. *One one thousand*, he breathed. *Two one thousand*. He breathed again. "Not unless you make me."

Billy's grin widened. "How do I make you? I could fuck Nancy. I could punch what's his name. The kid with no teeth."

Steve stared at him. "That's...that's the shit you're gonna do?"

"Not if you tell me the rules." Billy sat up and leaned back against the wall, crossing his arms with a smirk.

"What." Steve squinted, suddenly trying to calculate the amount of sleep he'd had recently. It wasn't enough. He knocked back more of his 'coffee'. "What are you talking about?"

"When," Billy leaned in again, "—you gonna—" his breath tickled Steve's lips, "—fuck me *up*, Harrington."

"Jesus," Steve jerked back again.

"Some blood on that bat." Billy stretched, leaning to look out the window. "You gonna bury me out in the woods? Oh, no, I know, the sheriff's your friend, you make it look like I drove drunk."

"What—" Steve clenched the edge of the desk, hoping this ride slowed soon so he could get off. "...I'm not..."

“Oh, I get it now,” Billy laughed, going still again. “You killed that girl. Barb. That’s why little Nancy-Nance broke up with you.”

“I—what?! No, I—I didn’t *kill* anyone,” Steve watched Billy’s legs kicking in the air as he lolled around like a happy cat, rubbing his eyes.

“That’s how you know ‘Hopper’. He helped you cover it up. Was she pregnant?” Billy cracked up, covering his face. “I thought you’d make a *great* dad, *King Perfect*, Steve Harrington, but that’s really *shitty* of you.” He grinned over lazily. “You’re starting earlier than *mine* did, did you make the bat for that, or did you already—”

Steve slammed his fist on the desk, making the light bounce and flicker. “I *didn’t kill anyone*. It was some—*animal*. It ate Dustin’s cat. Got in Will’s house. The—the little shitheads are just impressed because I babysat them while Hopper and Ms Byers set the nest on fire.”

“What, you hit some little...coyote?” Billy sat up to glare at him, all the musculature on display vibrating with tension as he leaned to breathe all over Steve’s face again, and Steve rolled backwards in the chair, sighing.

“Yeah. Yeah, it was a coyote. I’m not gonna hit you with a *nailbat*, Jesus.”

“So when I showed up at the Byers, you were all afraid of a *coyote*.”

“It was scary as hell,” Steve shrugged.

“So scary you had syringes of sedative big enough to put *me* down. Lookee, your majesty, I’m *so much bigger* than a coyote.” He spread his arms, smiling. It looked uncomfortable, Steve thought, the stiff denim over all that sweaty bare shivering skin. Max’ call earlier had given Billy the added funk of adrenaline sweat over his usual eau de teenage alcoholic smoker whose shower got interrupted, and Steve tried to lean back in subtly, feeling his brain clear of blue tint.

“Look, we don’t know what it was. It *ate* people—”

“Who, *Barb*?”

“Barb! Yes! It *ate Barb*, that’s why no one found her!”

“Why the hell didn’t you just *shoot* it?”

“I don’t have a gun.” Steve rolled his eyes, inhaling the relaxing smell of stupid asshole, and feeling it work on his lungs. “‘Hey, Sheriff Hopper, I need a gun!’ I’m sure that would have worked.”

“The hell? Where was he? They just left you with the kids and went off—what *was* it, a bear?!”

“Sure, yeah, I guess.” Steve shrugged, rubbing his face as the adrenaline keeping him awake ebbed.

“Sure. And then you used your *syringe* on *me*.”

“Max was afraid I’d die! At least we didn’t leave you on the floor to get *eaten*.”

Billy stared at him. “You locked me *in a trunk*...to be a Good *fucking* Samaritan. What the hell were you supposed to do with a syringe against—a whatever, like, jump on its back?”

“Well, you knocked me *out*,” Steve said, rubbing his face, his brain going a little fuzzy as the image of Billy punching him superimposed itself over Billy sitting on the edge of his bed. “That was Max and them. You’d just tried to kill her friends, she maybe just wanted you locked up somewhere. I didn’t wake up until they were *driving*,” he grimaced, forcing another deep breath.

“Yeah, but, I mean—they just left you with a bat and a syringe? What the hell kind of—where are *your* parents? ‘Hopper’ and the Byers just leave you to defend against—things—”

He sounded as pissed off as usual, and Steve shook his head, grinning. “Pretty safe until *you* showed up.”

“I wasn’t gonna... *fucking* *kill* them,” Billy snorted.

“You sure? You were sure acting like it.”

“He told me to get the little bitch *home*, okay—”

“Leave the little assholes alone, I am not fucking around about this —” Steve’s eyes narrowed.

“That’s when the bat comes out,” Billy took a shuddering breath, rubbing his face, “—just them, huh? ‘Cause you’ve still got some greeny face there from when I clocked you in the—”

“Fuck you, *and* me,” Steve amended. “Me too. Goddamn. Just don’t —fucking *attack* people. We used the *syringe*, and not the bat. Look, do you want a *shirt* to put on.”

“Make me,” Billy grinned, but his voice was starting to sound hoarse, and his hands trembled. “Why don’t you *make me*, Harrington.”

“Damn iiiit.” Steve let his head clonk against the first aid kit. “Look, you’re *shaking*. Are you actually *hurt*. Are you *cold*. Do you have any *wounds*.”

“I’m great,” Billy beamed back, eyes over-shiny in the low light, “—wanna check my teeth? They’re a little loose on the left. They’d probably come out easy. Bloody teeth all over your room.”

“Max was afraid your head hit the tub.” Steve leaned in to frown at the bruise, and Billy caught his breath.

“My—my knee. And—it’s fine. Why the hell was she listening.” His eyes were fixed on Steve’s mouth, like *Steve* was the biting risk.

Steve sighed with relief, spun in his desk chair, and stalked over to his dresser to throw a sweatsuit over—at first he aimed for Billy’s head, but logic happened, and he just tossed it on the bed within reach. “Do you want a shower? I mean, she said you—”

“Max should get that diarrhea of the face checked,” Billy growled.

“Or not, but like...they’re clean and dry.” Steve shrugged, wishing Billy and all his problems would just vanish into a nice sleep-inducing haze until morning.

After an odd moment where Billy apparently felt the need to hold up the elastic and test it, he glared over. “You gonna *watch*? My hot chocolate’s cold. Fix it, *Mom*.”

Steve blinked, then sighed, wandering back to the desk to grab both mugs. “We shower together after games, asshole. I’ve seen it all before.”

“Oh, you were *looking*?” Billy snarled, and Steve backed out of the room. “You eyeing me up? Wanna put your *hands* on me, *King Harrington*?”

“Just trying to pretend you were Cindy Crawford,” Steve backed through the door, sighing. “Bathroom’s through there, if you want it. I’m gonna go let the Scooby Gang know I’m alive.”

Naturally, there was a general scramble on the stairs as he turned down them. “We heard a thump...” Will watched his face nervously.

Upstairs, the shower turned on, and Steve sighed, dropping into a chair at the kitchen table. “Yeah, he’s so annoying I slammed my hand on the desk. Okay, I’m not saying I *like* him, or want him around—”

“Pshyeah,” Dustin agreed stoutly, glaring at Mike.

Huh, Steve thought, too tired to ask. “...I need to talk to Hopper.” He leaned his face in his arms.

“I’ll call El,” Mike’s eyes narrowed, his voice ringing with judgement. After a minute or so of whispering, the plastic of the handset banged Steve in the head, and he flapped his hand for it.

“Sheriff Hopper?”

“Steve.”

“Uh, you called me before when Billy was driving around. Did his dad call you again?”

“We’ve got a report of him leaving the house drunk, disorderly, and intending *mayhem*,” Hopper sounded disbelieving, “—which sounds about right, for him, what you got, kid?”

“Um.” Steve felt his shoulders hunch. “He was...here, that time. He wasn’t even drunk! He was just—” he waved a hand, “—sitting on

the couch. We watched Star Wars.”

“Okay,” Hopper waited, sounding even judgier than Mike.

“He just...showed up here again tonight, soaking wet and half in his jeans—”

“Ew, gross ,” Dustin made a revolted face at Mike, whose nose wrinkled. Will shot a glance upstairs, wide-eyed.

“And, uh, Max called? And said Billy’s dad grabbed him out of the shower, kicked his ass. Threw him down the stairs...I guess?” he trailed off, shrugging apologetically at the phone, as Mike mouthed ‘Good,’ to nods from the other two. “He’s pretty banged up?”

“Billy Hargrove has been hiding out at your house,” Hopper said slowly, and Steve rubbed his face, groaning, and feeling like he was shrinking inches every minute this conversation continued. He’d have to see if Billy minded carting him around, once he was the size of Stuart Little. “Did he finally do something? Why own up now?”

“Well, I mean, he’s not actually doing anything? Instead of having to drive around all night looking out for him, you can just call up and ask me whether there’s an asshole here bitching about Secrets of NIMH?” Steve bit his lips, uncertain about this strange ritual of communicating with adults.

Hopper took a long whistly breath through his teeth. “Not too comfortable with him around the kids.”

“Uh, yeah, I had him go upstairs, they’re like...segregated,” Steve made an apologetic face at Will, who blinked, then shyly nodded.

After a brief pause, Hopper asked “You tell that boy what to do and he *does* it?”

“...mostly? I mean, he knows I know you, I think he thinks you’d help me cover up his murder?”

“Hopper would.” Dustin nodded confidently.

“...only if it were *Billy Hargrove*,” Mike said loudly, shaking his head,

“—he wouldn’t let Steve murder just *anybody*—”

“I trust you not to murder anyone unless it’s self-defense,” Hopper sounded exhausted, but also like he might be laughing. “Call if you need anything, you know that.”

“...yeah,” Steve said, his throat too tight to swallow.

“Night, kid.”

“Yeah. Yeah, night.” He sat listening to the dial tone, wondering what to do.

“Why do you have to harbor *that* fugitive,” Dustin shuddered, holding his hands up like a silent movie heroine in denial. “Couldn’t you have, like, a hot British double agent? With eleven guns, that does flips.”

“Usually it’s *fine*, because nobody’s *here*.” Steve waved his arms, sighing.

Mike and Will both frowned from his face to Dustin’s, but Dustin made a very obvious “Cut it off” motion at his neck, and they didn’t ask.

Steve couldn’t help it, the idea of Dustin keeping track of his friends’ slumber party etiquette had him snickering again. “Holy god. I’m going back to *bed*.”

“But...Billy’s up there,” Will pointed out, and received an elbow from Mike.

“Yeah, he is. You guys can sleep down here or in the big bedroom, Dustin knows where.” Dustin nodded, obviously resisting a salute. “He’s...look, it’s fine, he...sleeps, like everybody else—”

“Is he why you haven’t been sleeping?” Will asked solemnly.

Steve snorted. “Ha. Nuh-unh. Okay, you guys have had nightmares —” Mike and Will nodded, while Dustin scoffed. “Imagine you’re—” Steve glanced at Will, trying to phrase it without pressing anywhere sore, “—somewhere in a nightmare, but something really weird walks

by, something so out of place it's funny—"

"...Clifford?" Will suggested hesitantly.

"Eugh!" Mike groaned. "I'm gonna *burn* that ABC book—"

"It's really hard to focus on our game around stupid *Clifford*—" Dustin rolled his eyes, "—you walk into a dungeon and suddenly Mike's mom's voice, 'That's an ostrich! O! O is for Ostrich!'"

"I *know*—" Mike groaned. "Try *living* there—"

"Clifford!" Steve grinned. "Exactly! That's right. So you're in a nightmare, and *Clifford* walks by. And you don't really *want* Clifford around—"

"He's annoying as hell—" Mike slumped into the other kitchen chair.

"Yeah," Steve nodded, at Will's thoughtful expression. "He's huge and he smells like a dog—"

"He takes huge shits," Dustin grinned proudly.

"—*but*," Steve eyeballed Will in particular, "—you can't really be *scared*, either, with the Big Friendly Dog stinking up the place—"

"Billy is Clifford," Will's eyes widened, "—you like having him here. Even though he smells awful."

"Yeah, well. He's showering." They all grimaced at the ceiling.

"I listen to music with Jonathan," Will said softly.

Mike nodded. "I call El, or put the TV on."

"I'm not scared," Dustin snorted, "—but if I was, I'd *call somebody*, Steve, come on, pick up the phone, you don't need a huge shitty dog."

"*Bedtime*." Steve stretched, groaning. "It's...whatever. I don't care." He staggered upright, already focused on the hours of sleep he might get with Billy breathing in the same room. "I'm going to bed, to

sleep, and if anyone wakes me up, there better be—” he glanced at Will again, and cleared his throat, and his head of monsters, “—a costumed supervillain, like, circling the house.”

“Nah, he’s already upstairs,” Dustin muttered, and Steve flipped him off, already running for the stairs.

As Steve frowned at the bed—it’d seemed bigger when he had a girl in it, but then, he supposed, he wasn’t wary of Nancy breaking his face if he brushed his elbow against hers in the night—Billy wandered in, sweatshirt half pulled over his head.

“Holy crap, there.” Steve stared at the purple bruising under Billy’s right shoulderblade and across his ribs, the familiar greeny-yellow handprint on his shoulder, fingermarks on his forearm, and what honestly looked like a heel-stomp on his lower back.

Billy scrambled to get the sweatshirt pulled down. “Fuck you. Go fuck yourself. King *fucking* Steve Harrington.”

Steve ordinarily had no trouble restraining the urge to laugh at Billy, who he mostly thought of as an unexploded bomb, but listening to his angry “fuck”s muffled through thick jersey fabric was hilarious. He forestalled it with a hand over his mouth. “I’m gonna go to sleep.” He pointed at the bed, more for his own comprehension than anyone else’s. “You can do whatever, but there’s still a whole Munchkin music number going on downstairs.”

Billy looked from his pointing finger, to the bed, back to Steve’s face. “This is an invitation to *sleep in your bed*.”

“I don’t care,” Steve tottered over and pulled back the covers. “Oh, I guess you could sleep in your car. I told them downstairs they could have the other bedroom or the couch, but I won’t be there to stop them bugging you, and if you murder them I’ll have to...” the pillow against his face felt like the smooth feathers of a celestial swan. “This is the best bed,” he mumbled.

“Harrington,” Billy’s voice came from somewhere off to Steve’s right.

“Steve.”

“Sleeping,” Steve told him, wondering dazedly whether he’d dream about Clifford. Or Billy. Or Billy riding Clifford.

He didn’t remember what he dreamt about, jerking out of a sound sleep to a shout of his name downstairs (Dustin, probably), and the streaming light of the motion detectors. He had a vague impression of vaulting over the banister and not dying, and finding Mike and Dustin trying to jolly Will out of a panic attack.

“It’s probably just a leaf or something,” Dustin said, both thumbs up, as Steve sighed and got his bat. The VCR clock said it was four, so he’d actually gotten a few hours of sleep.

He shoved his feet into his boots by the door, and stepped outside, keeping to the shadows, and shuffling, so he wouldn’t crunch loudly in the snow. The lights were scheduled for three minutes, so they flipped off soon after he began his circuit. He rested the bat against his shoulder, closing in on the sound of snow crunching.

Of course it was just Billy. Steve shuffled silently closer to the lit end of Billy’s cigarette, only to have the motion detector lights snap back on and illuminate Billy’s face from less than a foot away. Billy screamed, flailing backwards and landing on his ass in the snow, and Steve started snickering, leaning on his bat.

“What the *fuck*, Harrington,” Billy yelled, sounding breathless. His hair was dusted with snow, and the hoodie hood was wedged awkwardly half under the jean jacket, making him look a little less dangerous than usual. “What the *hell*, what in the—”

Steve considered himself, shirtless in yanked-on, unbuttoned jeans, a bloodied nailbat over his shoulder, and grinned. “I look like Conan or something.”

“You fucking *asswipe*, you look *nuts*—I thought I was gonna *die*—”

“The little bastards saw the motion detector come on and woke me up,” Steve shrugged, leaning on his bat again as he held a hand down

for Billy, who'd landed in about two feet of snow and a patch of scrubgrass, and was stabbing his hands in the snow without finding any leverage to shove himself upright. Billy jerked back, and Steve groaned, rubbing his face. "...you're just gonna sit there in the snow?"

Billy's glare didn't waver as he grabbed at the uneven grass, trying to push himself up, and Steve finally bent in close and grabbed his hand.

Billy yanked back. "—fuck go of me—"

"Come *on*." Steve set the end of the bat in the snow and pushed off it to haul Billy up, so chilled denim thudded against his chest.

Billy went still against him.

"Breathe," Steve recommended, recognizing the signs of recalcitrant lungs, and brushed a hunk of snow out of Billy's mullet. The skin under the denim collar was warm, and Steve let his half-frozen fingers linger there, breathing easily in the cloud of cigarette smoke, and the smell of his shampoo on Billy Hargrove's mullet. It was soft, and Steve let his fingers curl in it, resting his thumb behind Billy's ear.

"The hell are you putting your hands on me." Billy's breath was warm against his ear, but he didn't pull away.

Steve considered, head clear and and nearly fizzy with the hours of sleep. In the chill of snow against his shoulders, with his hand clenched in the denim of Billy's jacket, he felt farther away from tunneling nightmares than he had in months. Billy finally lifted his face from Steve's shoulder enough to take another drag on his cigarette, which forced him to wrap that arm loosely around Steve's shoulder to reach. Steve giggled, mentally cataloguing the windows probably holding small, horrified faces.

"You tell my dad I'm here and nobody'll ever find my body," Billy breathed smoke against his head, before pulling back enough to press his lips to Steve's.

He has long eyelashes, Steve thought, less confident about his wakefulness than he'd been moments before, but kissing Billy's warm mouth was weirdly cozy, and he leaned into it, feeling the bat slide from his hand. "Wait—" he whispered, clenching his fingers in the curls at the base of Billy's skull, and Billy groaned against his mouth, eyes sliding shut. "...wow," Steve mumbled, distracted by the immediate rush of red across Billy's cheeks, but Billy ducked his head, jerking away, so Steve pulled him back with his other hand around the nape of Billy's neck. "Wait." He licked his lips, thinking. "That's. Huh. We should go back inside. But your dad knows you—you're gay?"

"I'm not a *fag*." Billy jerked backwards, but didn't try to disentangle Steve's hands from his hair and neck. "I fuck women, *Harrington*—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, but you just...I mean," Steve ran his thumbs up Billy's cheeks, pulling him closer, fascinated at the lack of protest, "—wait, that's why he—?" He touched the bruise carefully.

"No," Billy growled. "I mean, I don't know, I know mom didn't just have a dizzy spell on the stairs, but I bet she—she wasn't—*fucking women*—"

"Jesus." Steve tugged him back in so their foreheads met, studying Billy's closed eyes and shivers as their breath fogged. "You think your dad's a *murderer*? You think he—"

"Shut the fuck up, Harrington." Billy swallowed. "The hell are you gonna do. You gonna tell 'Hopper' I kissed you. You gonna tell my dad. Might as well kill me with that bat, *Steve*." He shifted away, stilling at Steve's hand cupping the back of his skull.

"No, no, *jesus*, calm down—" Steve pulled him close again, breathing in Essence of Hargrove in hopes his mind would stop spinning. "Fuck. You—your dad killed your mom?"

"Dunno what the hell else coulda happened," Billy said thickly, tense against him.

"...jesus." Steve whispered against his jaw. "You should—you should tell Hopper. Christ. Uh, we should—we should go back inside."

“Your three little piglets probably already called him. They’ll think I ate you out here.”

“Oh shit.” Steve grabbed Billy’s hand in one of his, scooping up the bat with the other, and began dragging him back toward the house. “How long have I *been* out here, they probably *did*—”

“What the *hell*, Steve, why—you’re—let go—” Billy tried to shake him off, staggering after him through the snow.

“It’s fine!” Steve shouted, stumbling over all the shoes as they tromped through the door. “This asshole was having a cigarette!” He held up his and Billy’s hands like they’d won a trophy, and Billy tried to jerk away again, snarling under his breath.

“What are you doing,” Dustin said levelly, staring between them.

Mike’s nose was wrinkled. “You can let him go now.”

Will’s red rimmed eyes traveled over Billy and fixed on their clasped hands, but he just cocked his head, raising his eyebrows at Steve, who felt his face heat.

“We’re going back to sleep—” Steve dove towards the stairs, prompting a burst of expletives from Billy, who scrambled after him.

Upstairs, Steve closed and locked his bedroom door, dropped the bat to thud against the wall, and turned to face Billy, who was shuddering at regular intervals. “Un...less you want more hot chocolate.” Steve stood back, surveying the shivers and teary eyes.

“I don’t fucking want hot chocolate, what is it with you.” Billy bared his teeth, hunching in on himself, and Steve reflected with a grin that for once, he didn’t want hot chocolate either.

Steve dropped into the office chair, letting it slowly spin him all the way around. “You *kissed* me.”

“Prove it in court,” Billy sighed, hugging himself in his snowy

jacket.

“Come on.” Steve waved him over.

“Hell no.” Billy backed away, his shoulders hitting the wall again.

Steve opened his mouth, closed it, then snorted a laugh. “Don’t make me grab your hair again.”

“Fuck you.” Billy’s eyes narrowed, but slowly traveled down Steve’s chest, over his abs, and down to his unbuttoned jeans and visible triangle of plaid briefs. “...plaid the new thing at court? Isn’t your room enough? Look,” he rolled his shoulders, probably forgetting his borrowed saggy grey sweats were hiding his usual flexing pectorals, “—you want a blowjob? You can’t tell anyone.”

“What?” Steve blinked.

“Want my mouth on your dick?” Billy sauntered towards him. “Don’t tell my father.” He leaned in to whisper along Steve’s jaw, and Steve resisted the urge to reach down and hoist his dick out of his briefs. “Don’t tell the sheriff.” Billy dropped to his knees, mouthing down Steve’s chest. “Don’t—cave my—head in,” he muttered, then went still as Steve slid a hand in his hair. “Don’t crush my eyeballs with a nailbat, and I’ll blow you.”

“Wait,” Steve groaned, tugging to detach Billy’s warm, soft mouth from the edge of his jeans. “Damn it. Billy, hold on—”

“The *hell* is wrong with you, Harrington?” Billy sat back on his feet, eyebrows raised. “Close your eyes if you want, I don’t care—”

“I just—” Steve ran his fingers along Billy’s jaw, losing his train of thought as Billy tipped his head willingly.

“You wanna hit me *and* have me?” Billy laughed, turning his head to bite gently at Steve’s hand. “I’m hot with bruises. Gimme a bloody nose, kiss off your daily iron allowance, your *majesty*.”

“No. No.” Steve clenched his fingers in the silky hair at the back of Billy’s head again, feeling him sag. He was careful not to yank individual strands.

“Don’t tell *anyone*, though. Hit me, don’t kill me—” Billy pulled Steve’s thumb in his mouth with his tongue, sucking suggestively, but his eyes were getting shiny again. “Come on. You don’t really wanna haul me out of another trunk.”

“Jesus, Hargrove,” Steve yanked his hand away from Billy’s mouth, “—I won’t tell anyone you’re—I mean, that we’re—what are we even doing.” For the first time, his lungs started to feel stiff even with Billy Hargrove right in front of him. He forced some small, shallow breaths, watching Billy’s eyes start to brim over. He put the hand not holding Billy’s hair over his mouth to forestall what was probably about to be another flood of abuse, and took another breath. *One one thousand*, he counted to himself, holding it and letting it out. “You—you’re a *fuckhead*,” he started again, feeling Billy laugh against his hand. “Look, I’m not gonna—if you get up right now, I won’t tell anyone, and I won’t—*hit* you, or anything. If you wanna be there, that’s—that’s good too. But. I won’t tell anyone.”

Billy shook his head, trying to get away from Steve’s hand over his mouth—since Steve hadn’t moved when he licked it—and Steve lowered it, narrowing his eyes. Billy cleared his throat. “What’s the point, then?”

Steve flailed his free hand. “It was your idea!”

“I like *women*,” Billy bared his teeth, “—you’re just gonna shut your eyes anyway.”

“What, you want me to stare at you?” Steve pressed his licked thumb to Billy’s lower lip. He’d tasted like cigarettes and chocolate.

“I don’t fucking want anything.” Billy let his eyes slide closed, pressing his face into the seam of Steve’s jeans. “Neither of us are fucking...queers.”

Steve wondered, in passing, whether he wanted more of a sexual buffet table than he’d suspected. *It makes sense*, he thought, one hand in Billy’s hair, the other satisfying various curiosities about Billy’s ear piercing, the texture of his stubble, and the heat coming up under his freckles. *Nobody wants the same thing forever, right?* He leaned in again, kissing *Billy Hargrove*, and huffing a laugh of disbelief. Billy

flinched back, eyes blinking wide.

“You gotta lay off the little shitheads,” Steve remembered to say, pulling back. Billy’s mouth quirked, and Steve kissed it again, tugging at Billy’s lower lip and its edge of stubble with his teeth. Billy moaned into his mouth, and Steve grabbed the collar of his jacket, pulling him closer—not that there was much closer for him to be.

“I don’t give a shit about them,” Billy panted against his mouth.

“I ended up with them somehow, you need to be...okay with them, if you can *be* nice to people without...taking your pants off,” Steve pressed lightly on Billy’s unbruised cheek with his thumb, and Billy obediently opened his mouth. He still tasted better than Steve would have expected, his mouth warm and smoky, and his body ever more pliable as Steve held him firmly by the hair.

“Being nice right now,” Billy whispered back, and Steve snorted, pulling him into another kiss. The left side of Billy’s mouth tasted coppery, and his soft groan turned into more of a pained whine, but he slid his arms around Steve’s neck to stop him from pulling away.

“God,” Steve tucked his face against Billy’s other cheek, breathing him in, “—you—you gotta promise, though. If you’re about to lose your shit at a kid, *walk away*.”

“I wouldn’t really,” Billy laughed, pulling his arms back to fumble at Steve’s pants. Steve grabbed his hands.

“Billy.”

“I *won’t*,” Billy spat, shoving away to stomp over against the wall, “—the hell is this, Harrington, some kinda trap. *Fuck* you.”

“Nooooo,” Steve said slowly, feeling whiplash, “—that was...” He felt his cheeks flush. “That was good. You should come back over here.”

“Why the hell would I.” Billy rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck menacingly, but wandered a few feet closer. “What if one of your spawn calls the sheriff. He’ll show up and shoot me in the

head.”

“Oh! I called him,” Steve blinked, “—while you were in the shower —” he cut off at Billy’s soft choking noise.

“He’s not here, what, he’s just waiting for me at home, then—” His voice had gone high and wet.

“What?”

“He’s gonna know, *Harrington*, he’s gonna—god, fuck you, he’s gonna nail me to a fucking fence—” He scrambled over to reach for the bat, and Steve put all his basketball lessons in interference into preventing him from reaching it, finally hugging Billy’s arms to his body.

“*Sshhhh*,” he tried, unable to think of anything else. “Shhh, Billy. I called Hopper. I told him your dad was a liar. I told him we watched Star Wars. He’s not coming. He’s not telling your dad.”

“*Fuck* you—” Billy’s voice shook.

Steve rocked them back and forth, hugging him tighter, and Billy snorted into his shoulder, trembling. “Lemme go.”

“Not sure I should,” Steve breathed against his neck.

“This is so gay,” Billy groaned.

“I think we’re both maybe half gay, though.” Steve loosened his grip, sliding his hand up to stroke his thumb against the base of Billy’s skull, and Billy shuddered, snorting a laugh.

“Fags come in fractions?”

“Maybe.” Steve told him, shrugging.

Billy took a deep breath, tickling Steve’s ear. “...maybe you’re a moron.” Steve slid his other hand under the denim jacket and old sweatshirt, running the flat of his hand up and down Billy’s back. “Maybe,” Billy whispered in his ear.

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: Billy uses slurs to deny his pantsfeelings for Steve, is typical terrible Billy. By the end of this chapter he's starting to think gay might be a thing Steve is allowed to call him...in some circumstances.**Thank you so much for wandering in! Thanks so much for reading, and particularly to the commenter who was so enthused she got me excited about writing this chapter, SionainnShay! Every comment or kudo is like a teeny bit of writer rocket fuel. Lemme know if you liked my story--I lovelovelove hearing from people! Kudos! Short comments! Long comments! Questions! Constructive criticism! Comments as extra kudos! Thanks so, so much! XD**

(I try to reply to each one, but if you don't want a response to your comment then please say "No reply please" or "Whisper" so I'll know not to reply.)

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3. Head trauma leading to mature discussions of personhood

Summary for the Chapter:

In the reality of school, friends, and daylight, Steve copes with having kissed Billy Hargrove...mostly, by kissing him again.

Notes for the Chapter:

You'll notice the chapter count has become four...sorry, it kept getting longer, and I thought I better post something now rather than wait another age to finish all in one swoop!

There won't ever be any depictions of physical abuse onscreen, I'm sliding along with third-party witnesses and implications, but this is an emotional chapter, so if you're worried about content, check the end notes!

“Hey. You comin’ tonight?” Billy leaned next to Steve’s locker, dripping from the shower, his towel in his hand. His hair was dripping across his collarbones and chest.

“Where?” Steve frowned over, then turned away to breathe in the stale smell of gym clothes, closing his eyes as the fluorescent lights shone on Billy’s shoulders, abs, and smirk. “Carol’s.” He leaned in, warm breath heating Steve’s ear, and his voice dropped to barely audible. “Beat me at darts and I’ll blow you in the laundry room.”

“What?” Steve felt a grin forming, wondering whether Carol thought Billy was coming alone, and whether Tommy knew, but shook it off. “Why the hell’d you tell me your dad murdered your mom, *Hargrove*,” he hissed back. “Hopper’s *pissed*. He wasted his *whole weekend* tracking her down.”

Billy took a slow breath, his whole body pulling back and tensing like he’d iced over. Steve kept towelling his hair, jerking his head away as Billy slammed both lockers with a punch that left a smear of blood

across the vents. The coach's voice shouted over, but Billy was already stalking out into the hall. Half the basketball team ran after him. Their laughter at his wet naked ass failed to alert poor Mrs. Durand coming around a corner—she yelped, holding a pile of folders in front of her face. Billy knocked them aside to scream into her eyes, and shoved her into the wall.

"That dude's hilarious," Tommy beamed, and Steve stalked back in to ask the coach to see about Mrs. Durand.

A sharp knuckle in the back awoke Steve from blue-lit tunnels to the soft scratching of chalk at the front of the class.

"You aren't breathing," Nancy whispered. "Steve."

He clapped his sweatshirt sleeve over his mouth in case of croaking noises, and focused on the page numbers copied out on the chalkboard. They blurred, and Nancy smacked the back of his head.

"Steve," she hissed, just as the bell rung, startling his lungs into action.

He gulped for air, closing his eyes for a few seconds, and wincing as she jabbed him with her pencil. "I'm breathing now," he smiled, ducking his head to sort out his bag, and she grabbed his shoulder.

"Library. *Now.*"

He considered, then nodded. Nancy having a whole litter of kittens over his inattention in class sounded nearly as jarring against the Upside Down as breathing against Billy Hargrove's jacket.

She drug him by the elbow anyway, stopping by the drinking fountain. "Do you need some water?"

"Nah," he rubbed his face, finding that imagining himself as a fainting, corseted heroine didn't have much entertainment value. Maybe if he told Billy later.

Her eyes narrowed, and she drug him on through the library doors,

shoving him at a table. “What’s going on,” she whispered. “You were *better*. Mike keeps answering calls and then asking whether you showed up to class, and then whether you stayed *through* class, and then whether I saw you *after* class, but I thought you looked better!”

“Oh.” He rolled his eyes, wondering whether Dustin, Will, or Max were checking up on him. He dropped his bag on the table, dropping into a chair. “No, I am—I’ve been sleeping better.” She brought the full weight of extremely concerned eyebrows to bear, and he quailed. “Last night was—long, I mean, I don’t know, what do you want me to say, Nancy?”

“You weren’t asleep, just now,” her nose wrinkled in concentration, and his stressed brain informed him she was still unfairly attractive. “What’s going on, Steve?”

“That doesn’t happen as much, I’m really fine—”

“I know I haven’t really been around—”

“Oh, no, okay, Nance. There were monsters, this isn’t about—*us*. My house is way out there and it’s quiet and dark and lonely, and the snow looks like—” He frowned at a window. *Like the floaters in the air in the tunnels.*

“I never thought I’d say this, but I wish the wind would kick up,” she inspected a hangnail, “—I’ve been using my curtains, even during the day, it’s silly.”

He snorted, jerking the zipper on his bag back and forth. “Anyway, the little turds keep coming out to keep me company ‘cause they think they’re gonna find me dead on the floor because—”

She waited, raising her eyebrows, and he dropped his forehead to the table and groaned loudly enough for the librarian to smack a book loudly on her desk and clear her throat. “Steve.”

“I can’t believe they haven’t told you,” he muttered.

“Steve,” she said again, and the cool table started to feel good against his hot face. “*What* didn’t they tell me. I can get it out of Mike.”

"I like girls," he informed her anxiously. "I *do*, it's not—*that*, I mean, I'd still date you, it wasn't *you*—"

Nancy jerked her head back, face squidged. "Ew, Steve, whatever this is, why does my *little brother* know about it? *Gross.*"

That was enough to get his head off the table. "Nasty, Nance," he echoed her grimace. "Not like *that*."

"You aren't making any sense," she raised her eyebrows.

He took a deep breath, glad to see horrifying confessions were enough of a distraction for his lungs to engage. "I'm, uh. I'm kinda, y'know...seeing Billy Hargrove."

She snorted. "Psyche! Seriously, Steve."

He clenched his teeth, glancing around, then whispered, "I am *kissing Billy Hargrove*. Look," he leaned in, running his fingers along his jaw. "*Stubble burn.*"

"Oh my god," she stared at him.

"I *know*." He let his head fall back, sliding down in his seat.

"Steve. Oh my god."

After a long silence, he lifted his head to look at her, pulling his bag closer as a barrier between them.

She'd gone a little unfocused, her expression fixed. "No wonder they're—wait, no, that can't be what *Mike* knows. He—what *happened*, Steve. Oh my god."

He whined into the side of his bag. "They left him in the *trunk* of my car! I took him back to my house, he just...he comes around now. Like when you feed raccoons." He looked up to see her shaking her head, smile stiff.

"That's pretty *accurate*, Steve, what if you don't feed him one day and he *eats* you?" She leaned in, face serious, as though the biggest danger with Billy was a shortage of Violent Stranger Kibble.

"I don't think—" He paused as she reached over and took his hand.

"Grace Olive Wiley was one of the most famous venomous snake handlers of all time," she began, and he blinked. "She claimed they were harmless if you trained them the right way, but she was bitten while posing with one for a picture. It took her thirty seconds to pry it off her finger. Steve."

"He's not *venomous*," he resisted the urge to pull her hand closer, "—I mean, like...I know he's *terrible*, but he hasn't..." He let his face fall against his bag again. "Did Mike tell you anything about Billy's dad? Max' stepdad?"

"No?" She pulled her hand back, leaning in, eager as ever for new information, and he grinned at the familiarity.

"Max says—" he stopped, biting his lips while he considered, "—he beats the shit out of him. Like, all the time. I think he broke a bottle or something over his head? He showed up covered in broken glass and cooking sherry." She blinked slowly. "And I *know* cooking sherry, because—you know Tammy Ives, she was my first kiss, we'd been drinking cooking sherry."

Nancy appeared to be biting back an explosion of laughter.

"Billy doesn't drink *cooking sherry*, it's *salty*, and anyway, he smelled more like—"

"I believe you, Sherlock," she said around her fingers, her shoulders shaking with giggles. "I have never drunk cooking sherry, you're the expert witness—but *Steve*, you can't just—he beat the shit out of *you*, you can't just—"

"I knooooow," he moaned into his bag. "He's convinced I got Barb pregnant, killed her with a nailbat, and...buried her in the woods? I think?"

Her mouth hung open.

"I know! But he knows I'm lying about what I used the nailbat *for*—"

"He's seen your bloody nailbat?" she asked weakly. "Why..." Steve

waited, but she just shook her head, leaning her face in her hands.

"It's a colossal mess," he sighed. "I think he thinks I'm scarier than he is?"

She gripped her notebook. "And that's... *impressive?*"

"He thinks Hopper helped me cover it up," he rubbed his face. "I don't know what to *tell* him, the truth is—"

"Out," she agreed. "Truth is out. Why does he..." She scrunched her nose up at him, and he shrugged, waiting. "If he thinks you're a *murderer*, why does he want to—" it was her turn to glance around, whispering, "Why does he want to *kiss* you?!"

"I don't *know*," he whispered back. "Why do *I* want to kiss *him*?"

She pressed her hands together under her chin, pursing her lips as though there was an answer in her mental card catalog that would make everything make sense.

"I think we're both like...half gay, Nancy," he whispered, holding his hands around his mouth to keep the soundwaves from informing half the library.

"But he's *terrible*," she whispered back. "Have you ever wanted to kiss *Jonathan*?"

"No," he shook his head, wide-eyed. "No, I swear, Nancy, I absolutely do not wanna kiss your boyfriend—"

"I'm not *worried* about it," she rolled her eyes. "Jonathan's not going to—" she frowned at him. "It's *bisexual*, by the way, not—not *half* gay."

"It is?" he asked, voice thready. "People are...that?"

She reached over and squeezed his hand. "I'm trying to figure out what Mike knows now, because if he knew you were kissing *Billy Hargrove* I don't think he'd be *worried*."

He opened his mouth, but she held up a hand.

“Actually I’m wondering, now, *are* you bisexual? Have you ever been attracted to another man? Because it’s *Billy*, Steve. *Hargrove*. What you might be is *crazy*.”

“That’s probably true too,” he hugged his bag to his chest, “—he—he *helps*, though. He’s just—I can’t think about—things—when Billy’s there stinking like—like cigarettes and cooking sherry.”

“Buy a *dog*,” she suggested, raising her eyebrows. “Come over. Y’know what, I’ve been stealing my mom’s horrible vanilla candles, my room smells like the bathroom in a furniture store, it’s very...distracting.”

“Those were *rank*, where does she even—”

“You could ask somebody normal out. You’re still popular.”

“I can’t date anybody that *knows*, though,” he stared back, and she swallowed, lowering her eyes, “...and anybody else is gonna ask about the...” Nancy waited, and he cleared his throat. “I’m weird now, I barely sleep, I do weird things with—marshmallows—”

“Mike mentioned the marshmallows.” Her mouth quirked. “I...guess that might have been something we thought was weird? I don’t know what weird looks like to everyone else anymore.”

“Probably includes kissing Billy Hargrove,” he snorted into the bag, catching her giggles.

“You could kiss Tommy,” she stuck her tongue out, nose wrinkled, “—I mean, bleah, but think about it, he might try to beat you up but he wouldn’t *win*.”

“*Tommy*,” he echoed back, wrinkling his nose.

“He’s awful,” she leaned in convincingly, “—and *safer*.”

“...I could just watch *The Outsiders* a few hundred more times,” he muttered into his bag, and she frowned.

“...Dallas Winston, isn’t it. The scary one.”

Steve raised his eyebrows, feeling his neck start to flush. “Shut up. I saw you looking at Rob Lowe’s jawline too—”

“Jawlines,” she whispered. “He does have a nice jawline, doesn’t he. It’s just that Billy Hargrove is attached to the jaw. What does *Mike* know, though? He didn’t catch you two *necking*.”

“No!” Steve shuddered. “Just, uh. Billy keeps just...coming over? And then the Goonies showed up—” she blinked, then waved him on, “—and he was there all night? For their *sleepover*.”

“Oh my god.” She held her hands over her mouth. “What’d you *do*?”

“I told him to go upstairs, and they watched *Lord of the Rings*—”

“Eugh.” She stuck her tongue out. “I was so relieved Lucas got sick of the singing goblins.”

“*Will might know*,” he whispered back. “I drug Billy back inside by the hand—” one eyebrow raised at him, and he glared back at it, “—and Dustin and Mike were just doing that thing little cats and birds do, y’know, trying to scare Billy—” he leaned his head in his arms.

She blinked. “...puffing up? They were doing a threat display? I can see it,” she cocked her head, grinning, “—did Mike have his arms folded?”

“I don’t know, just Will was staring at our *hands*, the others didn’t notice.”

“Do you want him to keep it a secret? I can try to talk to him.” She wrinkled her nose thoughtfully, and Steve sighed over her freckles, feeling another flutter of relief that his sexuality wouldn’t be entirely Billy-Hargrove-directed in future.

“...I mean.” He bit his lips, the urge to protect his band of goblins throwing his brain back to barricading a bus. His breath shuddered, and he rubbed his face. “If I *was* dating Jonathan—” they both screwed up their faces, “—and I don’t *want* to, but if I *was*, then...I’d probably have to tell them. But if Dustin gets in Billy’s face about kissing me, Billy might,” he paused, tongue caught in a whorl of possibilities. “Grab him. Walk in front of a Mack truck. Jesus, I

don't know."

"Steve," she reached over for his hands again. "You don't need him around. Come over after school. I'll give you some candles. You're going to get *hurt*."

He snorted. "It's, I mean, it's not..."

"Steve," she repeated, eyes narrowing. "He could have killed you."

"I know, I know." He let his head drop onto his backpack.

"I don't want to have to shoot him." She squeezed his hands, and Steve started giggling again.

"Shit, Nancy," he grinned up, "—what happened to our *lives*."

The candles were, as advertised, *rank*, and Nancy smuggled them to him through the bathroom window as he shielded his face below. "She keeps accusing Dustin of taking them because she knows I hate 'em," she stage-whispered down.

"You should spray some of her perfume on him, next time," Steve whisper-shouted back, and she buried her cackles in her forearm, before leaning out to throw him the bag. When he got home, he realized he didn't have anything to burn them in that he wasn't kinda afraid would crack, or catch on fire.

With the promise of singing mice unfulfilled—*Rescuers* and *Secret of NIMH* had played through without him reaching more than a light doze, and even his secret weapon, a copy of *Cinderella* from the mail-in video club, had had no lasting effect—Steve took a hot shower. Heat sometimes worked, though by the time he was drowsy the hot water heater was choking out its last burst of relaxation. The chill startled him into opening his eyes, rubbing his face, and scooting to turn off the water before yawning into a slump against the still-warm tiles. Just as his eyes started to drift closed again, he blinked alert to a crash outside—glass, it sounded like, against the house.

He went alert like an herbivore, body still, ears straining, before catching a tuneless yell. “*Billy*,” he groaned, rubbing his face again. “I was almost asleep, *Billy Hargrove*.” At the sound of a second crash, he flapped a hand out along the wall and yanked a towel down on his head. The air of his bedroom was frigid compared to the bathroom steam, and he stopped, shaking his head, then looped the towel up with his elbow and scrubbed it at his hair. He sighed. He could hear the beat of a car radio, and muffled shouting. The window was reluctant to open, but Steve was vaguely glad he hadn’t hurried to the front door, because Billy Hargrove had a six-pack labeled ‘Bud Lite’ on his hood, and he was hucking beer bottles at the door. “Billy!” he yelled.

Billy staggered against his car, fumbling with what looked like a rag in the top of the bottle. It flamed up.

“Fucking Christ,” Steve groaned, letting his head drop against the sill. “*Hargrove!*”

Billy swung to look around in a circle, dropped the flaming beer bottle (it went out), fell against his own car, and slid down to sit against the tire, wiping his nose against his wrist. “*Fuck* you, Harrington,” he yelled, fumbling to pick up the bottle. “*Fuck* you! King! King...Harrington!” It’d rolled against his foot well within reach, but using the fingers provided at the end of his arms seemed to be presenting a challenge.

“It’s two o’clock in the *morning*,” Steve shouted, then shut the window, shivering. He huddled himself in the towel. Another bottle crashed against the side of the house as he stumbled over the office chair on the way to the stairs, and Billy yelled some more, and then Steve opened the door. He slammed it shut again against another flying bottle.

He began composing an explanation to Nancy in his head. *It was sleep deprivation. When I see him, my body knows if there were predators around he’d have been eaten, I think.*

The doorknob rattled. “Lemme *in*, Harrington!” Another impact shook the door as the phone started ringing. Steve’s hair dripped freezing cold water into his ear, so he began drying it, wandering

over toward the phone.

“Heard a call over the radio about your place,” Hopper’s voice sounded too awake for the hour. Steve stepped around the corner, yanking the cord so it whipped into the front room, in hopes Hopper wouldn’t be able to hear the yelling at the door.

“Sorry?” Steve tried. “Everything’s fine.” Everything *was*, was the thing, the adrenaline had cleared his head, his lungs were working like a well-tended racecar, and Billy was unlikely to set *anything* on fire with a Molotov cocktail made of Bud Lite.

“Your neighbor Ms. Williams saw flames,” Hopper waited, and Steve grimaced.

“I’ll have to apologize for waking her up.”

“Heard crashing, too.”

Handily the door was thick. Steve cupped his hand around the phone and his mouth, trying to keep the handset from picking up Billy’s screams. “Everything’s fine here, but if it’s going to get quieter, I *really* need to go,” he tried, gritting his teeth as it went briefly quiet outside, before there was another crash.

“Kid,” Hopper sighed. “They’re sending a car by.”

“Shit,” Steve said into the handset, hung up, stared at it in horror, and ran to the door. Maybe Dustin could relay apologies through Eleven. He yanked it open. “*Billy*, for chrissake—”

Billy squinted at him.

“Beer doesn’t burn, asshole,” Steve told him. “Though since you haven’t figured that out, maybe I shouldn’t tell you, you might try again. What the hell are you *doing?!?*”

“Naked,” Billy snorted. The bottle he’d dropped rolled against his foot, and he very slowly lifted his foot to let it roll under his car. “You...you’re.”

“Yeah, man, you didn’t exactly *call ahead*.” Steve shivered, tucking

the towel around his waist.

Billy tried to push up off the car and stand, staggered, and caught himself against the side mirror. "I stole Carol's tequila," he stage-whispered, snickering, and Steve groaned as he crossed his arms.

"I'm glad you didn't set *that* on fire. Look, you--somebody called the sheriff, you moron, are you here to...fight me?"

"No," Billy shook his head, and grabbed at the door of his car as his knees bent. "No. Jus' hate you. Fuckhead. Harrington. You—you got that *bat* behind the door. *Bastard.*"

"I don't, but—" Steve watched Billy trying to get the lighter back into his jacket. "How'd you make it here *alive.*" Steve started to step outside, and Billy held up a hand.

"Glass," Billy walked around his car with a steadying hand on the hood to reach in and turn off the engine. "...s broken. Glass."

"Yeah, gee, Billy," Steve yawned, leaning in the doorway. "How'd that get there. It sure is a mystery. If you try and drive you're gonna kill somebody."

"Yeah," Billy laughed, letting himself fall against the hood. "I never wear a seatbelt. Want me gone?" He grinned over, slowly leaning back so his jacket fell open. "Kiss me an' tell me to go off the road, Herring. Harrington." He started giggling. "Just hold my head—back—and tip the tequila in, you. You *fuck.*"

"Billy," Steve hissed. "The police are coming, get in here."

"...glass everywhere." Billy wove his way over, stopping to rub his face and stare at the step up to Steve's door. "King Harrington."

"Get *in* here," Steve waited, letting his head fall sideways to press against the edge of the door. He let go as Billy reached the door, scrabbled at it, and it swung shut. Steve yanked it open again just as Billy fell against it, half-catching him as his head slammed into the knob and the edge of the latch. "...jesus, Billy, you alive?"

"Shit," Billy curled in on himself, and Steve hauled him inside by his

denim collar. “Fuck, Jesus, Harrington—”

“There were headlights—somebody called the police,” Steve said, batting Billy’s hands away, trying to see whether the blow had drawn blood. “I just—just needed to get you inside—”

“That for throwing bottles?” Billy kept grabbing at Steve’s hands, trying to stop him from checking the point of impact with the doorknob. “It’s *fine*, I’m *sorry*, *Harrington*, shit—” he held his arms up between them, trembling. “I get it, you *fucking* asshole, you fucking —”

“You *fell into the door*, dipshit,” Steve yelled back.

Billy started giggling into the floor. “Barefoot,” he whispered. “Barefoot King Harrington.”

“I tried to *catch* your drunk ass!” Steve shoved him further across the floor into the kitchen, and Billy slapped his hands on the floor to brake. “I didn’t *slam your head* into the knob, Hargrove.” He let himself slide to the floor next to the denim menace, face against the linoleum. Billy’s breath smelled like tequila.

“Soooo sorry I threw bottles at your pretty house,” Billy whispered back, lowering his arms to wipe blood away from his right eye. “Where’s the *bat*, you asshole. Shithead.”

“Why the hell *were* you throwing bottles at my house, dipshit?” Steve reached over to thumb another trickle of blood off Billy’s cheek.

Billy flinched back and grabbed his hand, twining their fingers. “...Tommy showed up.”

Steve rolled to his back, sniggering, staring at the ceiling. “So was it a party, or like a mutual belt-notching—”

“Gives a shit. Come on, *Harrington*.” Billy kissed Steve’s captive hand. His lips were warm and soft, and Steve groaned, rubbing his face with the hand Billy wasn’t imitating fellatio on. His tongue was *incredibly* distracting, supple and hot and wet, and Steve could feel his dick starting to prop up his towel.

“*Hargrove*.” Steve rolled to face him again, partially to hide his tent. “C’mon. What’s going on?”

“You suck,” Billy grinned back, dissolving into giggles again. “I could suck.”

“Are you *high*,” Steve sighed. “Don’t answer that. Come on, budd-uh, Billy.”

“Yeah,” Billy let himself get hauled to his feet, stumbling toward the couch.

Steve pulled Billy’s hand from where it’d slid up his thigh under the towel. “Come on, you’re bleeding. Lie down.” Billy tried to pull him down, patting clumsily at Steve’s naked chest and shoulders. “No, come on, just lie back, I’ll be right back—”

When Steve ran off upstairs to grab the first aid kit, Billy yelled more slurred insults and apologies after him, and Steve pressed his face into his pillow for a long second and whined. He glared down at his crotch. *Think less about his tongue and more about the blood running down his face*, he thought at his dick, then sighed. “Also remember he just tried to set my house on fire with *beer* and lost a fight with my doorknob.” His dick was mildly discouraged by these truths. Before running back downstairs—Billy had started singing his name as the lyrics to ‘My Sharona’, so it didn’t seem *urgent*— he kicked his wet towel off, and pulled a sweatshirt on. After a moment of thought, he grabbed a second sweatshirt for Billy. “Steve Har-*ring*-ton~” warbled from below.

When he got back downstairs, Billy was on the floor by the TV pulling videocassettes off the shelves, the discards forming a wall around him. “Haunted car,” he muttered, shoulders hunching as Steve walked back in. “What’s this say?”

“God, you’re so drunk. Come on, lie down, you’re shaking.” Steve dropped to lean against him, sliding an arm around Billy’s tight shoulders. He tugged the videotape out of Billy’s hand, leaning in to lick his ear when Billy wouldn’t let go.

Billy went still, staring back.

“*Christine*? It’s a stupid movie,” Steve warned, raising his eyebrows. “You’ll love the car—”

Billy drug him closer by the front of his sweatshirt. Steve blinked, swallowing, but tilted his head into the open-mouthed kisses Billy pressed across his face. Piled videos fell as Steve swung his leg over Billy’s lap, sliding his hand up into Billy’s hair on the side he wasn’t bleeding.

“You’re still bleeding, babe,” he ran his fingers through Billy’s curls, pulling him close to breathe against his collar. “Come up on the couch. I’ll clean you up.”

“Not your ‘babe’,” Billy leaned in for another kiss, “—you still pretending I’m Lady Nancy?”

“There’s a position as Queen open,” Steve offered, anticipating the elbow-in-the-gut-shove combo. He snickered, watching Billy wobble to his feet and stalk off to the couch. “I dunno, you’re practically twins and all. Not really used to kissing somebody I wouldn’t date.”

“Just—just *attacked your castle*, Majesty—” Billy leaned his face into the back of the couch, huffing a laugh, and Steve wandered over. He picked up the aid kit. “I can. I c’n leave. Park somewhere. Sleep it off. Now say *sorry*.”

“Nooooope, what the hell, you’re such an asshole.” Steve scooted close, but let Billy see him put his hand up to inspect the damage.

Billy shuddered at his touch, but leaned into it, letting his eyes slide closed. “...says *you*.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re great, we should definitely trade letter sweaters and share milkshakes,” Steve snorted, running his thumb over Billy’s cheek. “Just a second. Blood’s getting all in your hair, I’m gonna—” He pressed a wad of gauze to it, guiding Billy to lie down with his head in Steve’s lap.

“Wha’s happening.” Billy cleared his throat, sliding his hand under his head to brush most of his mullet out from under his head.

“I think it’s mostly a bruise,” Steve pulled his attention away from

the length of Billy's eyelashes and surveyed him with the knowledge he, Jonathan, and Nancy had gained by frantically cramming first aid books over winter break. "I'll keep pressure on it until it stops bleeding."

"Fuck do you care, you're such a prick," Billy muttered into his sweatpant leg.

"You're in my *lap*, dipshit, what are you even talking about," Steve ignored the phone ringing again.

Billy tried to bite his thigh through his jeans. "Harrington, you—*fucking* fucker."

"Are you actually *mad* at me? Because *you* rammed your head into my door, not me—" Steve ran his fingers through the unbloodied sections of Billy's hair, feeling him scoot closer. "I can't even tell, stop grinning! You tried to set my *house on fire*, and I'm like 'What happened, Carol run out of wine coolers?'"

"*Fuck* you," Billy choked, punching his leg again. Drunk as he was, it didn't particularly hurt. "She said you were coming."

"That's weird as hell—hey, hey hey hey—" Steve pressed more gauze over where it had shifted, ignoring the phone ringing *again*. Billy muttered something, turning his head against Steve's sweatshirt, and Steve's mouth dropped open. "Are you—are you *chanting* 'I hate you'?! After you come *over* here, you—I'm not forgetting about the *fire*—which you suck at—"

"*Fuck* you, I do, I *hate* you," Billy whispered thickly, trying to bat Steve's arm away before resting his own arm across it to hide his face. "*So* much, *fuck* you, just—just *die*, you fucking—bitch *bastard* —"

"Shit! Shit, don't—" Steve bit his lips together. *If I say 'don't cry,' he'll turn this whole house into a mushroom cloud.* He let his fingers slide around the back of Billy's skull, pulling him in close, and the soft shaking and sniffles got louder until Billy punched the back of the couch a few times to drown them out. "Hey," Steve tried again, when Billy's breath was evening out, and Steve kinda wanted him to

come up to blow his nose. “What happened. Did your dad—”

“She’s not *dead*,” Billy punched his leg again. “It was all—it was *true*.

He told me...” Beginning to feel bruised, Steve felt his eyes narrow, considering just dumping Billy in Hopper’s yard with a bow around his upper torso. “She’s—she’s not dead, I thought he—he *said* she left. Kept *telling* dumbshit Billy she left. I thought *no way* she’d fucking just—just leave me there, she wouldn’t—she’s my *mom*—”

“...oh, oh shit, oh fuck,” Steve breathed, feeling his eyes go wide.

“I thought—he kept—thought he killed her,” Billy punched the back of the couch again, without much leverage since his knees were drawn up. “I’m so fucking dumb. I just...”

“She left him *and* you,” Steve said, aloud, like a genius, and Billy’s shoulders started shaking again.

“Sh-shut your *fucking* face, Steve,” he hissed. “She *fucking*...walked away. I keep thinking she didn’t know, right? Maybe he wasn’t like that before. Then *I* fucking came along.” Billy’s fingers slid under Steve’s shirt, but he was grabbing fistfuls of fabric. “This fucking *idiot* kid, fucking faggot piece of shit Billy Hargrove, she just—didn’t—she wanted a *kid* but not—”

“Jesus,” Steve leaned to look at the clock, and added another wad of gauze where red was seeping through.

“Just that—that fucking—he never hits *Max*—she took a good look at this stupid little cunt and left town—”

“You’re not,” Steve said, clenching his jaw. “Shut up, no, that’s not—jesus, Billy—”

“Then she *knew*, fuckhead,” Billy smacked the couch again, “—she knew he’d—she *knew* what he’d—but it was *me* so she didn’t give a *shit*, she probably just—couldn’t *wait* ‘til I caught the bus—counting the minutes, is he fucking gone yet? Never have to see *his* face again —”

“No, I just mean, yeah, you’re *Billy Hargrove*—”

“Shut the *fuck* up, *King Harrington*—” Billy tried to shove away, punching his arm, and Steve caught him around the shoulders and braced them both against the floor with his legs.

“No! No, Billy, listen, c’mon, you *are* a—just—a complete piece of *shit*, but you’re a *person*, you don’t—nobody deserves that. I just meant—I’m sorry, *jesus*—” Billy was half sliding onto the floor, but he submitted to being hauled mostly against Steve’s shoulder, his forearm covering his wet laughter. “He didn’t just start that— *bullshit* because you’re *you*, she didn’t do—do whatever shit because you’re just—I mean, you’re *garbage*, but you’re a *human being*—”

Billy’s giggles sounded wet. “Yeah, right, genius,” he sniffled. “—I fucking *know* I’m trash, asshole—”

“But you’re a *person*, you were a little kid, right, she wouldn’t—”

“I’m a *garbage* person,” Billy laughed harder. “Garbage Pail Kid. They shoulda just taken me to the pound.”

Steve honestly couldn’t tell whether he was arguing or not, and suspected Billy didn’t know either. Just as he opened his mouth to point out that 100% of humans had been pissed off at children and *most* had managed not to belt them across the face, there was the beep of a siren pulse in the drive. Steve grabbed Billy’s hand and made him hold his own gauze, scooting out to run to the door. “Stay *quiet*,” he called back over his shoulder. “I’ll get rid of them, but they can’t see you.” Billy snorted loud enough to carry to the door, and Steve rolled his eyes as he unlocked it, squinting out into the flashlight of one of the deputies.

“We got a noise complaint,” the man called, slowly crunching across the snow-covered glass. “Mind turning on the porch light?”

“We just have the motion detectors,” Steve blocked the door, smiling. “Sorry. Drunk friend showed up. He’s passed out, noise is over.”

“Lot of broken glass out here. Your friend wouldn’t happen to be Billy Hargrove, would he?” Steve heard a soft “Fuck,” from the living room, and braced himself in the door. “We got a call saying he was

drunk and disorderly. Is that *blood* on your face, Mr. Harrington?"

"It's really late," Steve felt his smile going stiff. "I've got school tomorrow. Everything's fine. Can I go back to bed now?"

"I'd feel more comfortable if I had a look around," the deputy aimed the flashlight into the room behind Steve, and Steve sent a prayer up to God or aliens that Billy wouldn't be looming behind him, blood dripping from his hair, his eyes gleaming in the light.

"Uh, no," Steve's lungs, finally showing up for work, were making up the time, and he gripped the frame of the door on both sides to keep his hands from shaking. *Hopper is gonna shoot me in both feet*, he thought, but he was also fairly sure he didn't want to turn Billy in for assault on his house with a weaponized six pack of Bud Lite, and have his front room turn into the Tet Offensive when a hapless sheriff's deputy tried to arrest a crying, drunken Billy Hargrove. "It won't happen again. Thank you for coming out, but I'd really like to get to sleep."

After a couple more refusals—Steve stopped fearing Hopper's disapproval, he found, when he had to shout at the man to get him to leave—he finally closed the door again on the receding taillights of the police cruiser, and returned to kneel on the floor next to the couch.

"You just got in a fight with a sheriff's deputy." Billy's mouth was quirked. "Why—?"

"You ever hit Max?" Steve asked over him.

"Not...really." Billy frowned, and winced.

"You ever *hurt Max on purpose*, Hargrove, it's not hard." Steve rubbed his face, leaning his back against the couch and staring at Billy's ring of movies.

"...I won't," Billy's breathing had gone shallow, "—I won't, Harrington, fuck, don't—"

The phone rang again.

"Because you know who hits kids is your fuckhead dad," Steve ignored it, "—and you went straight for Lucas—"

"*Fuck* you, Harrington, I'm not my dad, shut up," Billy flailed, and Steve grabbed his wrists, pressing the gauze back down. It wasn't difficult. Billy's skin was pale and sweaty, and Steve took a look at his fixed grin and reddened eyes and sighed, burying his head in the seat cushion.

The phone rang again, and Steve let Billy's wrists go, stomped over, and unplugged it, before returning to frown at the gauze, and unroll some fresh. "Even if you're pissed at me. Don't take a swing at a person. Come..." he snorted. "Chuck bottles at my house, I guess."

"What," Billy sounded hoarse.

"Come on."

"I'm not my dad, you *fuck*. I'm not gonna throw bottles at your house."

Steve raised his eyebrows, slowly turning to look at the front door.

"Fuck you," Billy curled up tighter.

"Come on, babe-buddy. If you get mad, I'll—we can play a half-court game, or something. Come get me."

"Fuck it out of me," Billy snorted, grinning at him, and Steve took a deep breath, trying not to imagine grabbing Billy earlier that day, and slamming him back into the lockers before he stomped out into the hallway. Grabbing him by the hair and kissing him until he went warm and pliable.

"Jesus, Hargrove." He let his head thump Billy's shoulder, feeling him laugh.

"Should find a girlfriend who doesn't care if I suck you off behind the gym," Billy whispered in his ear. "Carol thinks it's hot."

Steve stared at him. "You told her? That—that you want to—"

“Fuck no. I asked about you and Tommy, she said she could take us all.”

“Tommy’d beat your—nah, you could take him.” Steve ran his knuckles over Billy’s abs, sliding up under the jacket where Billy’s ribs were damp and cold with blood loss.

“I could take him.” Billy grinned, his teeth bloody.

“I wouldn’t date somebody else and fuck you.” Steve wrinkled his nose, and Billy reached out for a handful of his sweatshirt again, pulling him in to smell blood and tequila.

“It’s just dumpsters back there,” Billy whispered against his mouth. “Just garbage.”

“Christ, babe,” Steve kissed back, his stomach clenching. He pulled back, and Billy’s arm slammed into his hands, knocking them away.

“*Fuck* you, Ha—”

Steve slapped his hand over Billy’s mouth again, trying to string words together. “You’re not gonna hurt anybody, right?”

The couch squeaked as Billy punched his wrist again, growling, his eyes tearing up, but Steve held his head. “Shake your head or nod. Yeah. Okay.”

Billy’s eyes narrowed.

“Just wait a second, listen. You’ll come to me if you’re feeling like —” he risked letting go to wave at the door, and Billy closed his eyes. “Billy. Come on. Even if I’m who you’re mad at.”

Billy nodded shortly, swallowing.

“Okay,” Steve took a deep breath. “Then you’re not a garbage asshole. You’re gonna *try*.” He kept his hand over Billy’s loud snort. “Right? You’re good.”

Billy smacked his hand away. “I’m *good*.”

"You'll get better. You won't be fucking—*trash*, like your dad."

"You don't fucking think that." Billy's voice was hoarse. "Shut the *fuck* up, you'd fucking beat my face in—"

"I'm serious, you suck because you're an asshole, nobody's *born*—"

"You don't fucking have to tell me this shit," Billy pulled away, pressing the gauze to his head so he could sit up. "I'll...I'll fucking *be a good boy*, you won't have to hit me in the face with the nailbat. You coulda just." He laughed, leaning his head against Steve's shoulder.

"Just what," Steve leaned his head against Billy's.

"Fuck you," Billy sighed, and Steve echoed it.

"I'm just saying. You can't have been born a shitheel."

"Try me," Billy snorted.

"Look, if any kid's *that* much of an annoying little shit I'd've murdered one by now," Steve whispered into Billy's hair, prompting a snicker. "I've *saved* them from—the—and that little bastard Mike *still* looks at me like I should be fired from life. If I was *gonna* beat on a kid, they—their heads would—they'd look like cranberry salad. "

"What'd you save 'em from, Steve Harrington," Billy slurred, and Steve smacked his own face.

"My *point* is, if you don't hit kids, you don't fucking hit kids."

Billy blew his nose in Steve's sweatshirt, and Steve yelped, grabbing a throw pillow and smacking him in the butt with it.

Billy cackled. "...you wanna hit *this* instead?" He shoved the gauze away, sitting up to turn a slow grin on Steve that had his pants feeling tighter, and sent a tingle running down his spine. Billy leaned in, sliding his arms around Steve's neck, and smelling like tequila and aftershave. For once, he didn't taste like cigarettes. His face was wet and salty, and warm, and smooth-shaven, and Steve lost track of words for a few seconds kissing it. "We could fuck," Billy whispered

into his kisses. “Right now. You can’t even hurt me right now.” He slid off the couch to straddle Steve’s lap, nearly falling off and braining himself further on the coffee table.

Steve grappled him back upright. “What the hell. Shut up, Billy, lie back down—”

“I’ve done it before,” Billy rocked against his lap. His ass was warm and heavy with muscle in his tight jeans, and Steve lost all power of thought. Billy kept whispering against his neck. “I’m feeling no pain, Stevey, I’m so numb.” He bit at Steve’s lips, his breaths coming quick. “I’ll be so good for you, Majesty. S’tight in there, doesn’t get much traffic. Nothing like it.”

“God—” Steve snorted, clapping his mouth shut before the ‘—*no, what the fuck, what do you mean you’re numb,*’ escaped into the air, pretty certain he needed to actually think about what he said before Billy Hargrove broke his jaw, stomped his drunk ass outside, and drove into a tree. Billy’s hair felt drippingly wet, and he jerked his hand back. “Goddamn, you’re bleeding *everywhere*. Come on, man, lay back down.”

“You *fucking* want to,” Billy snarled, grabbing the front of Steve’s pants, and yanking on his zipper.

Steve grabbed his hands. “Fucking *hell*, Hargrove—”

“Come on, I’m *cold*, ” Billy kissed him again, trying to jerk his arms out of Steve’s grip, “—c’mon, pretty boy—” He leaned in as much as he could with all their arms between them. “Your hands are warm. S’just your dick in a tight hole, doesn’t make you a fa—”

“Jesus, Hargrove—” Steve kissed him back, licking into Billy’s mouth every time he drew breath to talk. He started tasting blood, a little tang at the edge of his mouth, then sticky down the side of his face, then dripping down his chin. “*Billy Hargrove*. We gotta stop the bleeding.”

Billy laughed, curling into him, his muscles soft the way they went when Steve grabbed his hair.

Steve shivered, carefully letting go. He'd squeezed handprints into Billy's forearms. *Like he was making out with Sylvester Stallone again*, he thought, biting his lips. "Lie down, babe," he leaned to grab the gauze. "I'll keep pressure on it—we—we can do whatever when you're not *bleeding out from a head wound*."

"Keep calling me cute names," Billy muttered. "You dumbshit. I'm not your *girlfriend*."

"Nooooo..." Steve stepped to the other end of the couch, not trusting Billy Hargrove's head in his lap *facing* his dick. He beckoned him down, layering gauze in his hand. "Sorry. Dickhead."

Once the bleeding finally had really, truly stopped, Billy scrambled away from his lap, stomping over to the magic circle of videos and tossing Christine at Steve.

"You just want me to put it on so you can steal the best seat," Steve rolled his eyes, and sure enough, once the previews started, his corner spot was taken. He dropped against Billy's side. Billy's hair felt crispy with blood as Steve slid an arm around him. "You sure you don't want a shower?"

Billy shook his head, closing his eyes, and Steve got up to get him some aspirin.

Steve snickered through Christine, grinning when he caught Billy watching him. "What?"

"Nothing." Billy drained his beer can, and began prying off the tab.

Onscreen, the haunted '57 Plymouth was gnashing its hood, and Steve let his head fall against Billy's shoulder, closing his eyes.

"Harrington." Billy elbowed him.

"Mmm..." Steve scooted away to lie down, politely ignoring Billy's weird swallowed choke.

"*King Steve*," Billy hissed. "*Your Majesty*. Get your head out of my

lap.”

“Nuh,” Steve rolled his eyes, “—get over it.” He fell into a light doze when Billy didn’t shove him off, waking to fingers prodding his head.

“...movie’s over,” Billy slurred, half-asleep, and still drunk.

“Fix it,” Steve mumbled, shrugging, and turning his head away from the light and sound to bury his face against Billy’s stomach. The denim was uncomfortable, so he burrowed in against the smooth abs, wondered whether they were damp from his breath, or if Billy was still cold-sweating with tension, and kissed them open-mouthed before licking across with the full width of his tongue. Billy shouted “Fuck” a few times in a high wheezy voice, and shoved Steve’s head, scrabbling sideways over the arm of the couch.

“Fucking Harrington *Steve fuck*,” Billy swayed, panting, his arms folded over his stomach, “—what the *hell*.”

Steve felt like he hadn’t slept in a year, which made everything funnier. “You’re salty,” he sniggered, half off the couch, and shoved himself back up, his flailing foot thudding against the floor.

“Shut up.” Billy sidled around the couch and clicked rewind, his face lighting with the black and white noise of a disconnected TV.

“Ants,” Steve muttered into the pillows. “How come *you* can kiss *me*.”

“Shut it, Harrington,” Billy knelt to frown at the shelf of movies. “What’s this. Alien?”

“S’good,” Steve sighed, rolling on to his back to frown at the ceiling.

Alien did not lend itself to another nap. As soon as the room lit with blue light, Steve could feel the hair on his arms rising. The passages in the ship were white, and shiny, but the mysterious creatures and the blue had him up off the couch, pulling off his bloodied sweatshirt. “I need to go have a look around.” He tossed the shirt, ignoring Billy’s head cock. There was a scrabbling behind him and

the TV switched off.

“What are you doing?” Billy followed him into the garage, chugging the last of his can of beer.

“It’s fine, you should stay.” The sound of Billy crushing the can against the unbloodied side of his head brought him back, a bit, and he came over. “...you look like I hit you with the bat.”

“Who cares,” Billy grinned at him.

“Go put that sweatshirt on,” Steve pointed, taking a deep breath of Eau de Drunk Billy and feeling himself smile. “There’s *snow*, man, c’mon.”

“Yeah, mom.”

It was snowing *again*, making Steve’s skin prickle at the lightly falling fluff in the dim bluish light, but Billy bumped their shoulders, and Steve leaned in to kiss his face, twining their fingers together.

“What.” Billy pulled away, unzipping the sweatshirt—it had blood on it, Steve realized, Billy’d grabbed the one he’d discarded, not the clean one—and pulling out a pack of cigarettes. Steve circled him to zip it up, but Billy frowned, turning away. His lighter was flicking too fast, and Steve dropped the bat, sliding his arms around Billy from behind to zip up the sweatshirt. Billy’s ear was hot against his cheek, and Steve dodged away from his flailed smack, laughing. He swiveled back when Billy started coughing after a drag on his cigarette.

“You okay over there?”

“Lemme alone,” he coughed again, bending to brace himself against his knees. “Just swallowed wrong. Somebody. Somebody *hugged* me. What. What are you,” he flapped a hand and Steve took it, grinning. “What was that. I’m up now, give my hand back.”

“I’ll hold it.” Breath billowed as Steve grinned back at him.

“We’re *outside*,” Billy hissed.

"I only have one neighbor," Steve kicked the handle of the bat back up and grabbed it. "That smells nothing like a tunnel."

"What?!"

"You smell good," Steve pulled him close, breathing in his hair.

"Shut up," Billy snorted. "I fucking don't, stop lying."

"You know that's the sweatshirt you blew your nose in," Steve bumped his shoulder, and Billy glared, then spat to the side.

They crunched through the snow all the way around the house to the edge of the woods, Billy lighting cigarettes serially partly because they were warm. "What are we even looking for," he asked again, and Steve shrugged, squeezing his hand.

"Not a damn thing, really, just makes me feel better."

The small house on the way to Steve's was entirely lit up. Resonant barking shook the door. Once they'd climbed the steps, Steve pushed Billy behind him, feeling him go stiff again. After a few rounds of thumping, the door opened on a slow-moving woman with a cane, a huge smile, and white curly buns on the sides of her head. She clasped Steve's pale hand in both her gnarled brown ones, and then pulled him in for a hug.

"I'm fine, Ms. Williams." He patted her back, waving over her shoulder to one of several pitbulls.

"What on earth," she whispered, then saw Billy as Steve stepped out of the way. "Good heavens. Is this your boyfriend?" Her eyebrows were nearly at her hairline, and Steve tugged Billy close and clapped a hand over his mouth before he got a reply out.

"This is Billy," Steve used the hand over Billy's mouth to make him nod, and Billy stomped his foot.

"Is everything...all right?" She narrowed her eyes at their clasped hands, then Billy's bloody face. "That's not fresh?"

“He fell.” Steve was bent over one of the dogs, hands under her ears to flap them gently. “He’s not my boyfriend. We didn’t see anything out there tonight.”

“Bless you.” She squeezed his shoulder, eyes narrowed at Billy, who rolled his shoulders, shrugging his charm on like a cape. “I won’t say a word, you know.”

“A pleasure, ma’am, thanks for worrying about this idiot.” Billy nodded politely to the dogs, and Steve snorted. “Let go of my hand,” Billy hissed, but didn’t pull away, his breath distracting against Steve’s ear. “What are you, some kind of suburban superhero?” He frowned around while she brought over a cut glass bowl of hard candies masquerading as strawberries.

Steve took one, locked eyes with Billy, and slid it quickly in his jean pocket. Rolling his eyes, Billy unwrapped his, popping it in his mouth, ignoring Steve’s urgent headshake. Once they accepted, she sat the plate down to pat the pitbulls on either side of her chair.

“I know about the mountain lions, honey,” Ms. Williams said, and Steve nearly crushed Billy’s hand.

“Uh, what?” Steve forced his lungs to laugh, ignoring Billy’s side-eye.

“Your little friend Dustin came by and asked me to keep an eye on you.” She turned her smile on Billy, patting the closest pitbull. “I had to clean up what was left of Sneezy, and Prancer here’s sister Blitzen, after all.” Billy, who’d just stuck candy in his mouth, choked, coughing. “These are Prancer, Florence Ballard, and Diana Ross. I do wish you’d brought the bodies to me, dear, my darling’s work made me a dab hand at taxidermy.”

Prancer wriggled toward Steve on her stomach, and he reached down to stroke her ears. “I mean, I used a nailbat, ma’am.” He kept his eyes on the dog, hoping Billy didn’t choke to death on horrible hard candies. “There wasn’t much left. Uh.” When he glanced up, Mrs. Williams was patting Florence Ballard, and Billy was mouthing furiously at him.

“He also told me about the bus,” Ms. Williams smiled at Steve’s spluttering, and rocked herself upright again. “Would you like some hot chocolate, honey?”

Steve nodded, crawling down half-under the couch to bury his face in Prancer’s belly. She was missing a leg after her run-in with the demodogs.

“Oh, that’s from the lions too,” he heard her telling Billy, who sprang up to follow her into the kitchen. Steve breathed in the smell of clean pitbull fur.

When Steve finally lifted his head, unable to relax while Billy received *Dustin’s* version of events, he sidled up to listen through the door. *I bet he told her I had a sword, and swung in with my merry men, on a vine*, he thought, leaning his head into the kitchen.

“More marshmallows, and he likes three spoons of instant coffee in there,” Billy was explaining, leaning against the counter to show off his abs and folded biceps, and smirking at her through his lashes. Steve covered his grin, coughing.

“My,” she glanced up, and Steve couldn’t resist stepping up slowly to slide his arms around Billy’s waist.

As expected, he went tense. “*Harrington*. I think a shard of this candy just punctured my tongue. ”

“I tried to warn you,” Steve whispered, biting his ear gently. “You remember my hot chocolate recipe.”

Billy pushed his face away, and Ms. Williams beamed between them. “Yeah, Steve, I can make hot chocolate. There’s a mix, it’s not hard,” Billy growled under his breath.

“It’s kinda complicated,” Steve whispered in his ear. “Even Dustin doesn’t get it just right.”

“Wow, I can *add water*,” Billy snorted. “She didn’t even have any candy canes.”

I don't need them, I have you, Steve thought, aware his smile was getting goofy. He accepted the chocolate, which was exactly correct, and sighed, squeezing Billy against him.

By the time Mrs. Williams had given Steve another tight hug—"Answer your *phone*, child," she chastised, and he hunched his shoulders—and they'd began walking home, it was dawn. The snow still looked like the floaty crap in the tunnels. *At least the world isn't blue*. Steve stumbled up the steps, unlocking the door, pushing it open, and sitting in it. He let himself fall back, his legs hanging outside in the snow.

Billy snorted, grabbed his hands, and drug him inside, dropping to lie next to him. "Mountain lions," he said to the ceiling.

"I guess," Steve sighed, rubbing his face. "Maybe don't wake her up again, she's tough, but I think she thought you beat me to death."

"She thought I was your *boyfriend*," Billy snorted. "What the hell. Whatever the hell this *is*—" he waved at Steve, then the bat, "—you gotta stop touching me. Out there."

"It's actually a good story," Steve rubbed his face. "Reason to be around. Yelling shit."

"...when did you even sleep last," Billy tucked his elbow under him, frowning over. "You're—you're fucking—*hallucinating*. If you think telling people that shit is a *good idea*. How long has it *been*."

"In your lap."

"...for real, fucker, when did you get a night's sleep, you look like I punched back."

"...whatever. I don't know. I'm telling. I'm calling 'em," Steve started crawling on his elbows, and Billy grabbed his arm.

"You are *tripping balls*...you should stay *home*," Billy pressed a hand to Steve's forehead, squinting in the light from the door. "Maybe you're sick."

At the feeling of Billy trying to take his temperature, Steve had

started giggling. “Okay, okay. Fine.”

“...do you want a ride to school? You shouldn’t *drive*,” Billy asked, staring towards the phone.

“...I dunno, are we both gonna die?” Steve looked over. “Are you sobered up enough?”

“I gotta pick Max up anyway,” Billy leaned over, letting his head rest against Steve’s chest. “Had a beer like...two hours ago.” He sighed. “Feel like I’m gonna fuckin’ die, actually.”

Steve snorted, sliding his hand down Billy’s spine. “You kinda smell like it.”

“Fuck you,” Billy mumbled into his chest.

“But yeah, I’ll take a ride. We can keep each other awake.”

“I’d kill God for some sunglasses,” Billy groaned.

“Didn’t know you needed a reason.” Steve checked the kitchen clock before letting his eyes slide shut.

Twenty-three minutes later, his alarm went off upstairs, and Billy curled into a fetal ball of muttered profanity before staggering to the bathroom. He didn’t latch the door, so the sound of vomiting came through clearly. Steve slowly rolled onto his face, then clambered to his hands and knees. *Sometimes I’d rather not have a body. Or a head.*

He winced at Billy’s loud gagging. *Given the kissing options right now, floating around like Casper seems like a great idea.* He leaned on a chair and pushed himself upright, stretching his back slowly in case something broke off. When nothing did, he wandered out to the front room and plugged the phone back in. It rang not three minutes later.

“Harrington residence,” he sighed, leaning his head against the wall.

“We’ve been called by the police.”

"I know, sorry, everything's fine."

"This is the third incident."

Steve walked back around the wall, leaning to see the bathroom door, then shrugged. "Actually my boyfriend just freaked out, we'd had a fight, he'll be over a lot, the water bill might go up?"

The other end was silent.

"Bye," Steve hung up, turning away from the wall to see Billy leaning in the entryway.

"What the hell did you just do." His voice was hoarse.

"I probably have a spare toothbrush," Steve put a hand on each of Billy's shoulders and walked him back to the bathroom, "—I didn't say it was you."

"What the fuck." Billy wiped his mouth, sitting on the toilet.

"Now if you're here all the time, there's a good reason."

"It's not even *true*," Billy allowed his fingers to be pressed around the toothbrush, "—you'll...what about *school*. You're gonna..."

"Nobody'll know. Come on, we gotta go."

When they pulled up at Billy's house, Max drug Steve out of the car and most of the way through a shrubbery. "Are you *okay*," she whispered. "Nobody could reach you. I could cut his brake cables."

"Jesus," Steve patted her hand where she'd clenched it in his jacket. "Uh, no, it's fine?"

"El heard police calls on the scanner. She said they mentioned a *fire*."

"Sorry." Steve tugged at his jacket. "We're both okay."

"He slammed my head into a door," Billy said from a few feet away,

and Max let go, glaring.

“Sounds like you deserved it.”

“You *fell!* He was drunk,” Steve turned to Max. “He gashed his head on the doorknob. I tried to catch him!”

“If he’d done it on purpose he’d *brag*, fuckhead.” Max shoulder checked Billy on the way to the car, and he pressed the heel of his hand to his head, setting his jaw.

Once they were in the car, Billy glanced between them, and turned down the volume on *Rock You Like A Hurricane*. “So,” he smirked at Max in the rearview mirror, “—Mountain lions?”

“What?” she snapped back.

Steve reclined his seat, nearly crushing her as she scrambled away. “*Dustin* told Mrs. Williams we fought mountain lions.”

“That’s stu—” she coughed as Steve widened his eyes at her. “Uh. Whatever, I don’t care.”

“So.” Billy ran his fingers through his hair, and Max snorted. “Not mountain lions, then.”

“Fuck off,” she muttered, scooting down in the seat. “God, you *reek*.”

“What happened in the bus?” Billy slid a cigarette out of his jacket.

“Jesus,” Steve hugged his backpack to cover his face.

“Your mom *made* you in a bus,” Max muttered, and Billy swerved. Steve swung over and grabbed the wheel, punching Billy in the shoulder and Max in the knee with his other hand.

“Don’t kill us. *Christ*.”

“What does this have to do with how I ended up in the *trunk*.” Billy smiled at Max in the rearview mirror, and she kicked his seat.

“Seriously!” Steve punched Billy’s shoulder again. “I don’t wanna

die. Just drive."

Billy cranked the music back up, lighting the cigarette, his face set. They hadn't even stopped pulling in in front of the school before Max had the door open, and Steve reached over to slide his thumb under Billy's cuff.

"Shit. I told Hopper I wouldn't tell anyone."

Billy shrugged, grinning at him as Max stalked around to start bodily dragging Steve out of the car. To Steve's bewilderment, Eleven stood by to slide into his place. She had a big pink bow in her curls and a matching dress, but her face had the flat stare he remembered from first meeting her. Mike slid in behind her, and Billy looked from Eleven to Steve, somewhere between entertained and pissed off. "What the?" he mouthed, spreading his hands.

Max slammed the car door, dragging Steve by the elbow into the first classroom off the middle school hallway.

"What's going on," he asked Dustin, who shook his head, shoving him at a chair.

"Steve, you've gone *insane*."

"It's an intervention," said Lucas, folding his arms.

Steve had his eyes on the windows watching Eleven in the car with Billy and Mike. Billy was listening, as far as he could tell, cigarette out the window. Glancing up to meet his eyes, Billy backed out of the parking space, and left the school.

Notes for the Chapter:

There's an accidental injury in this one, that bleeds a lot, but it's handled carefully and immediately (as possible) if that makes a difference. Also intoxication. We get some insight into the headspace Billy's been put in by his dad, and it's pretty awful. If you spot anything else I should have warned for, lemme know!

Thank you so much for wandering in! Lemme know if you liked my story--I lovelovelove hearing from people! Kudos! Short comments! Long comments! Questions! Constructive criticism! Comments as extra kudos! Thanks so, so much! XD

(I try to reply to each one, but if you don't want a response to your comment then please say "No reply please" or "Whisper" so I'll know not to reply.)

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4. Nightmares

Summary for the Chapter:

The last chapter got long, so have some conversation and takeout before the finale.

Note the rating boost!

“*Steve*,” Dustin sighed, shaking his head. “*Steve*, *Steve*, *Steve*.” He reached out and patted Steve’s shoulder, staring into his eyes.

Steve scooted back, the entire desk sliding sideways out of the row with a screech. “What the hell? Sorry I didn’t pick up the phone? I guess? It was three o’clock in the morning, guys. Do you know why *Eleven* wanted to talk to *Billy Hargrove*?”

“*Probably* she thinks he kicked your ass again! He’s lucky Mom didn’t wake me up,” Max growled, dropping to sit on the desk Steve was facing across the tiny aisle. “My mom told *Eleven* it was a school night and hung up, or I’d have...come gotten him.” She rolled her shoulders.

“Uh.” Steve held a hand up.

“My little sister told me you both *burned to death*.” Lucas put in, leaning next to her. “That was my morning!” he flailed his arms, “—we’re getting in the car to pick Max up, and Erica’s like ‘Oh Lucaaaaaas, your girlfriend’s brother died in a fire at Harringtonooooon’s.’”

Steve could easily imagine the scene, and covered a snort. “Did she put her hands on her hips?”

“She *sang* it,” Lucas hissed back.

“*Steve*,” Dustin huffed, glaring around. “Everyone. We’re all war veterans now, so—”

“What the hell, man, you are not a *war veteran*.” Lucas punched his arm.

"The Second War of Hawkins," Dustin scoffed. "Uh, yeah we are. I thought you guys had my back on this, come on—"

"No, I said it was *stupid*."

"Wow, I sure do not want to be late for school..." Steve started to stand, and Max kicked his knee.

"Don't *kick* him, he might be *dying*, he spent a whole night with your *brother*—" Dustin wailed, clutching at Steve's hand, and the desk creaked as Steve jerked back.

"That's not what a war veteran *is*," Lucas hissed.

"Lucas, you're making the most sense," Steve pointed, and Dustin gasped, "—your turn."

"*Thank* you." Lucas rolled his eyes. "I know you gave them all that whole stupid speech about Billy being Clifford—"

"That's so dumb," Max groaned.

"—but what he *is* is an alcoholic shithead, and you should tell him to fuck off. Show him the bat again." Steve muffled a snort at the thought of Ms. Williams showing her dogs the squirt bottle.

"You could also call me, or Hopper," Max was counting off on her fingers, "—or me. Or that old black lady next to you could probably run him off with her dogs."

Dustin clutched his heart. "Mrs. Williams is archangel to a *chorus of darlings*, how *dare* you."

"A what." Max paused.

"Shut up, Dustin." Lucas rolled his eyes.

"A group of angels can also be called the host," Dustin waggled his eyebrows at Max, who leaned away, nose wrinkled, "—which is *hilarious* because that's what they feed you and call it Jesus—"

"I don't give a shit about *Jesus*, Dustin—"

“What is Eleven planning with Billy?” Steve interrupted. “And Mike?”

“We don’t *know*, Steve,” Max punched the desk, “—because you wouldn’t answer the *phone*, so we had *no clue* what was going on! And now Eleven’s probably—” she growled, punching the desk again.

“What *happened*.” Lucas scooted closer to her. “Last night.”

“Welllll,” Steve considered how much of Billy’s business was none of theirs, “—Billy came over. He was drunk off his ass. He’s loud. Mrs. Williams heard him and called the police.”

“Don’t lie to *us*, Steve—” Dustin sighed, and Lucas and Max interrupted while he paused for drama.

“What about the *fire*.” Lucas stared him down.

“Did he finally set your mom on fire?” Max’s grin was more a baring of teeth, and she’d never reminded Steve so much of her brother.

“He was doing some dumbshit drunk shit out there!” Steve rubbed his eyes. “Nobody got hurt, much—”

“Much?!” Dustin yelped. “I’m calling Hopper—”

“*Billy fell*—” Steve pushed him back onto the desk, “—and clonked his head on the bolt of the front door, and then he got blood all over my couch, that’s all.”

Max’s eyes were narrowing, and Steve spread his hands. “That’s really it, pretty much, I need to—” The door creaked open, and he shoved Dustin behind him as Nancy poked her head in.

“Everything okay?”

Steve cleared his throat, nodding, and let go of his white-knuckled grip on the bar of the desk, snorting. *What’d I think I was gonna do, grabbing the desk like a melee weapon. Swing it around my head?* Nancy cocked her head at his snickering, her eyebrows broadcasting concern. She didn’t seem to register Dustin waving.

"Is Steve okay?" Will came in with her, wide-eyed, and Steve grimaced, hunching his shoulders.

"I'm great. Sorry I freaked you out."

"Oh, Will gets a 'sorry'?" Lucas smacked his shoulder.

"I was doing first aid," Steve rolled his eyes. "Head wounds bleed like crazy."

"He fell into the door," Max repeated.

"Well, first he went to Carol's and took all her beer and tequila, and *then* he came over, tripped on the mat, and conked his head on my door." He shrugged, as Nancy tried to muffle her snort. "I tried to catch him!"

Max nodded, picking at her shoelaces.

"We should get to class." Nancy squeezed Will's shoulder, and he smiled up at her.

"Oh, you just got here, stick around a while!" Dustin beamed at her, and Steve pushed him back into his seat again.

"Wait!" Lucas yelled. "You didn't agree to anything!"

"Yeah, let's go," Steve grabbed his bag, waving to his posse. "Later, Junior Heroes."

Billy was parked out front when Steve wandered out of his last class, letting Carol light his cigarette. "Soooo last night," she reached in her shirt and readjusted her boobs, sort of fluffing them, like pillows. "Why'd you leave?" she leaned in with her aired-out cleavage barely contained, and pressed Billy up against the car. Steve stopped to watch. He leaned against one of the poles holding up the roof, as Carol wrinkled her nose, redirecting from Billy's mouth, and Steve nearly cackled aloud remembering the vomiting sounds that morning.

"Wanted to fuck up Harrington," Billy cupped his mouth to smell his

breath, and snorted, “—you said he’d be there.”

“We don’t *need* him,” she pointed out, just as a yell came from behind Steve—Billy glanced up, saw Steve, and smirked—and Tommy ran out to stomp up to his girlfriend and the boy she held captive against his car.

“What the hell are you doing?” Tommy yelled, and she nodded her head from side to side, and rolled her eyes, pulling her hand out of Billy’s jacket.

“What the hell are *you* doing, Tommy?” she asked.

Tommy rallied with a “Nuh-uh, *you*,” and she started mimicking his words as noises.

Under cover of their argument, Steve walked casually around the parked cars and slid in to Billy’s shotgun seat, then slowly leaned across to crack the window.

“Sluh-uhhh-ut,” Carol singsonged, fingernails deep in Billy’s denim-covered bicep.

“Sluttitty slut *slut*,” Tommy shouted back, grabbing her arm, and Steve covered his snickers with both hands, watching his limited view of Billy’s back tilt away from them.

“You *wish* you could be a slut,” Carol stomped her feet, and Billy’s back was shaking with laughter. Steve slid closer to the driver’s seat, prodding the denim arm through the window. Billy jerked, frowning down, but Tommy had distracted Carol by accusing her of wishing she was a *stud*, and they didn’t notice. Steve waved, and Billy grinned at him, looking not particularly worse for wear if you allowed for the blood still in his ear and what looked like a hangover for the Guinness Book of World Records. In clear view of the window, he slid his hand down to squeeze Carol’s butt cheek.

“I’ll see you later.”

“Brush your *teeth*,” Tommy retorted, “Fuckhead!” as Billy yanked at his door, couldn’t budge the two of them, and walked around.

Billy slid in the car, dropping across Steve's legs, and yanked the door closed as Max ran up. She was yelling over her shoulder. Billy grinned. "I thought you were *popular*. And *they* were your fuckin' friends?"

"He's got a point," Steve gasped, as Max banged at the window. "You smell like you've been eating tequila worms. In a grave."

"You *like* it," Billy snorted, his shoulder digging into Steve's as he leaned in to rub his head against Steve's like a huge cat.

Steve rolled his eyes, but yanked a hand loose, sliding it up to cup the back of Billy's skull. He ran his thumb over the soft curls. "Not really." *God, he's foul.* Steve could see Max's back leaning against the window on one side, and Carol's leg around Tommy on the other. Her dress had hiked up to show them his hand in her panties. "Usually...maybe," he admitted, and Billy huffed a laugh, curling into him. "Today, though..." Steve felt Billy's warm bulk coaxing him to sleep. *I'll use less oxygen if I'm asleep anyway*, he thought muzzily. *Won't matter he's crushing my lungs and smells like asshole.* "...thought you were so worried somebody'd figure you out."

Billy snorted against his neck. "Who's lookin'? They'll just think I'm fucking with you."

"You stink but my last class I was freezing," Steve mumbled, letting his eyes close.

"You sayin' I'm hot," Billy's teeth grazed his ear.

Max smacked the door with the flat of her hand, but she was yelling to somebody else in the parking lot.

"I know somewhere to park, and I'm kinda...hungry." Billy slid his hand down Steve's stomach, hooking a finger on the front of his jeans. His thumb slid up and down Steve's fly, and Steve groaned.

"I need a shower and sleep," Steve muttered into his curls, which needed a wash, but were further from the smells of tequila, vomit, and the bitter, rank sweat of fear. "You need a...a *hosing down* or something."

Max turned to bang on the window, and Billy scrambled over Steve's legs into the driver's seat, hitting him, somehow, with at least five elbows enroute. Steve yelped, tucking his legs up against the door. "Fuck you," Billy muttered.

"I'll kiss you when you've *brushed your teeth*." Steve rubbed his face, and Billy rolled up the window Tommy and Carol were smooching against.

"*Let me in*," Max mouthed, eyes narrowed, and Steve unlocked the door. She yanked it open, growling at Billy, and her backpack smacked Steve on the head as she clambered in to the back. Billy snorted. "You smell like the Marlboro Man's zombie," she kicked Billy's seat. "What the fuck. You smell like a *dead dog* rotting in a *distillery vat*, what the hell. Is it *gangrene*?"

"Shut your face," Billy lit a cigarette, and she gagged.

"You coulda taken a shower in PE." Steve leaned his head against the glass, watching Billy slowly lower the handbrake so they'd coast backward without alerting Tommy and Carol to their lack of support.

"I was out looking at that *bus*." Billy bared his teeth in a grin, letting the car roll backwards out of the parking spot so his side mirror nearly knocked Carol and Tommy to the ground. Tommy scrambled up, trying to punch the car, but Billy shifted and gunned it, sliding out of the lot.

"What bus?" Max leaned up between their heads.

"The *fucking bus*," Billy clenched his teeth, "—the one with *clawmarks* in it."

"Oh." Max dropped back out of view.

"The fuck happened in that bus, Harrington. Your kids wouldn't say anything. *She* hadn't even seen it, what the hell was that about? The boy made it sound like—like a fucking *wolf pack*."

"Ha," Max snorted. "Close enough."

“Huh...” The car was warm from the sun. Steve’s eyelids felt like when a sponge has been sitting out so long it can’t even absorb water. He let them close, until his seat bucked as Max started kicking again.

“What happened,” Billy asked her, and she snorted.

“Oh, yeah, 'cause I tell *you* things.”

“*Harrington*.” Billy hit the horn, and Steve’s head smacked back against the seat.

“Druh.” He rubbed his face. “Mwuh. Fuck do you want.”

“He said you had to barricade them in there. There was *blood*.”

Steve shrugged, wishing he could crawl in the back and nap. “I guess so.”

“Could you have *died*? What the fuck was the *sheriff* doing?!” Billy braked suddenly for a turn, and Steve’s face nearly hit the dash.

“Christ, are you two *fucking*?” Max stuck her head forward again, and Billy’s tires screeched as he ran off the road and up the grassy shoulder.

“Shut the *fuck up*, Max.” He took a long draw off his cigarette and turned off the engine, but clenched the steering wheel with both hands as she scrambled to lean forward between the seats.

“Did you forget what he *said*, you fucking—you bag of *shit*—”

“Shut the *fuck up*, don’t you dare—don’t you *fucking* tell him, Max—”

“I wouldn’t *tell him*,” she yelled back, smacking his shoulder and head. “I’d never *tell him*, you fuck, what the fuck are you *doing*--”

“Jesus,” Steve whispered, and Max grabbed his jacket, yanking his face close enough to snarl into.

“You—you *morons*,” she gritted out, swallowing hard. “Steve, if you fucking—if anyone—if you say a *fucking word*—”

"I...won't tell anyone," he glanced at Billy, who'd leaned his head in his elbow, against the steering wheel, then back to Max, whose breaths were hissing through her teeth. Her freckles didn't soften her fury. "Nancy knows," Steve admitted. "She won't say anything."

"What the hell did you—why the fuck—"

"Look, she *asked*—"

"Billy had a magazine with Rob Lowe on it." Max yanked him closer, whispering in his ear. Billy threw the door open, stumbled out, slammed the door again, and paced back and forth in front of the car, kicking at the grass and trying to light a cigarette.

"What," Steve bit his lips together, feeling the familiar adrenaline sweat prickle on his hands, "—the—Rob Lowe from *The Outsiders*? I think Carol has him in her locker. The poster's worn in the middle because she kisses him before tests." *Why am I telling her*, he wondered, stomach clenching, but the adrenaline felt good clearing his head.

"He used it to show him how to use the *nail gun*, Steve." She kicked his seat, dropping out of sight as her voice got thicker. "Told him there's a safety, you can't just shoot nails, you have to be up against something *solid*, and then he slammed Billy's shoulder into the wall and shot five nails into the head of the picture in his hand."

"...no wonder he likes it at my house," Steve said, on autopilot, watching Billy pace. "We're—"

"I don't wanna *know*," she shuddered, "—shut up, *eugh*."

"We're not doing much," he got out before she could cut him off, "—has he—"

"Gross, god, I thought you liked *Nancy*."

"I..." He took a deep breath.

"No, gross, why are you *telling* me, *Billy!*" she shrieked, and Billy scrambled to open the door.

“What,” he dropped back into the seat, hand over his face. “What.” He wiped his eyes, but his voice was so thick Steve started rummaging around his bag for his PE towel.

“You’re so disgusting,” she moaned, and Billy flinched. “You *stink*, Steve, what is *wrong* with you--”

“He doesn’t always stink,” Steve handed over the towel, shoving it at Billy’s head until he took it, burying his face. “Want a water bottle?”

“Go wash your face,” Max reached up to push him, “—scrub the snot off your—scrub your face off. I don’t wanna get in a—jesus, we kinda wrecked.”

“The car’s fine,” Billy snorted juicily, accepting the bottle Steve slapped into his hand and retreating from the car to dump it over his head over by the treeline.

“He’s always hanging around *boys*,” she wrinkled her nose, “—if his *dad* sees him he’ll...” she groaned into her knees, and Steve flapped an arm back to pat her back. The hair that brushed his fingers was coarser than Billy’s, but the low “fuck...fuck...*fuck*...”s she was muttering were all Hargrove.

“...do you think he’d actually do it?”

“...not the nailgun,” she snorted. “He doesn’t wanna go to jail. He thinks Billy’ll take care of himself, with the drinking and the...” She curled up around her bag, growling into the seat.

“The what.” Steve watched Billy scrubbing his face, probably for a good while longer than he needed to. *Breathe*, he reminded himself, though the adrenaline usually did a pretty good job of that. He never breathed so well as when he was hunting imaginary monsters in the dead of night.

“He thinks he’ll get in a drunk wreck and die and it’ll just be me and him and my mom and he keeps *saying* it,” she choked out. “He *wants* him to die, Steve, he talks about it all the time--”

“Christ,” Steve patted her sneaker, the only part he could reach, and she gave a wet snort and blew her nose on her sleeve.

“I don’t give a shit.” She kicked the seat again.

“Yeah?” Billy was trying to neatly fold the towel, for some reason, and Steve sighed, watching him set his shoulders and turn back towards the car.

“If *Billy’s* dead,” Max whispered, “—what about when he gets *mad*—” and then the door opened, and Billy tossed him the towel and the empty bottle, his face red and scrubbed.

Steve shoved them into his bag. “...let’s get Max home.”

“Gotta drop you off,” Billy said hoarsely, checking the mirror before backing out onto the asphalt.

“Nobody’s gonna tell,” Max reached up to slap his side. “Go hang out with Steve. I’ll tell him it’s a party, he loves that.”

Billy laughed, cracking the window to hold his cigarette out of it, and stole a glance at Steve, who nodded. “Cock suckin’ party.”

“You are *so fucking nasty*,” she moaned.

“Is he letting you spend a lot of time with Lucas?” Steve turned to ask her.

“I guess?” She frowned at him.

“Make better friends with Eleven.”

She slouched back in the seat, dropping her gaze, as Billy glowered between them, then back at the road.

“Seriously. She’s the sheriff’s kid, he can’t mind that. You don’t have to tell her about. Things.”

“Oh *really*?” Max cackled. “I shouldn’t warn *Eleven*.”

“I mean, you don’t have to tell her there’s a reason you wanna be friends. You two’d get along, though, I think. Mike and them keep trying to put her in dresses.”

"I thought her name was Eleanor," Billy muttered, and Max punched his seat.

"Yeah, fuckface, Mike *lied*."

"Whatever." Steve rolled his shoulders, letting his eyes close again. "Make friends with her. Teach her to skateboard, maybe."

"...huh." Max was quiet for the rest of the ride to their house, until she smacked the back of Billy's head on the way out. "You moron," she sighed. Billy lunged half across Steve after her, but she just waved, sauntering to the door.

"Let's get back." Steve pushed him back into the driver's seat. "Shower."

"Right away, your majesty," Billy leaned his arm across the back of Steve's seat to back out, and then left it there for the drive. A few turns before Steve's house, a sheriff's station car swerved out behind them, siren blasting, and Billy snorted. "Think I could outrun 'em."

Steve reached over and grabbed the wheel, but Billy was already veering to the shoulder, rolling down the window, and unhitching his belt.

"We weren't speeding." Steve leaned to try and see who got out of the car—he vaguely recognized the deputy in the passenger seat as they parked half in the lane of traffic to block the front half of Billy's car toward the woods. "...Sheriff Hopper isn't in there. What—"

Both deputies got out, one walking to Steve's side, the other banging on the roof on Billy's side. "Get out. Hands on the roof."

"We weren't speeding, what--" Steve frowned at the deputy on his side, before registering the one on Billy's side unsnapping his holster. "What the hell--"

"Shut *up*," Billy growled, climbing out to get shoved against his car.

"What the hell is going on—" Steve tried to open the door, and the deputy on his side frowned at him, knocking it closed with his hip.

“Wha—Steve Harrington?”

Feeling on steadier ground, Steve nodded, eyeing the one that had Billy braced against the car, his hand braced near his holster. “Yeah, why’d you pull us over?”

Steve’s deputy bent to frown in at him. “Why you drivin’ around with the likes of Billy Hargrove?”

“Uh—” Steve shrugged, hoping Billy wouldn’t elbow the other deputy in the face.

“What’s goin’ on, son?” The one holding Billy’s wrist against the car, the white one, smiled. “Now, I know you’re from a good family, I heard about you from your dad—” he began, and Steve shoved at his door again, hitting his deputy’s leg.

“Let me *out*,” Steve hissed, but the deputy on his side must have been listening to the other one lecturing Billy.

“How many of these talks we gonna have to have? You shouldn’t be drivin’ around with our Sheriff’s little girl in your car.”

“*She climbed in*, and she told me where she wanted to go,” Billy snarled, and got shoved against the car again for his trouble.

Steve crawled into the driver’s seat. “She did, officer,” he tried. “Seemed better not to argue with her—”

“That’s as may be, son. Now, Billy. Your father seems like a reasonable man, how many times you gonna make him call the station? We’re gonna need you to walk a straight line, and Officer Powell here is gonna search your vehicle.”

Shit, Steve thought, hoping there weren’t twenty bottles of hard liquor under every seat, or like...marked bills in a bloody briefcase, but when Officer Powell finally opened the door, he clambered back across and out.

“What’re you doing with—?” Powell asked, jerking his head towards Billy, who was swinging his arms to touch his nose, and baring his teeth at a lecture about curfew.

"I had a rough night." Steve cleared his throat, and the man nodded. "He gave me a ride, that's all."

"Huh." Powell leaned in to poke through the glove compartment.

"He's not so bad," Steve ran his fingers through his hair, sighing, "—I don't know what his dad told you, but..."

"Heard he beat you up pretty good." Powell glanced back, eyebrow raised.

"...we fought," Steve grimaced, "—yeah. But he's not...he's not what his dad says he is, is all."

"I don't know about his having a good, reasonable family," he raised an eyebrow, "—I do know you can't tell from a *glance*. I also know the man's right about him getting in fights." He checked under the seats, then brushed himself off, and Steve hove a silent sigh of relief. "And driving drunk. And judging by the smell in here..." He lifted what looked like a broken chunk of beer bottle, and Steve cleared his throat, grimacing.

"...he's helped me out a lot." He said finally.

"Be even more helpful if he doesn't get his license taken away," Powell scooted the passenger seat forward, and began patting down the back seat, "—or in a wreck." Billy was reciting something, and Steve crossed his arms, shivering.

"I *know*, but...are you guys just gonna pull him over all the time, or..."

"We got a call that somebody saw him with Jane in his car. Figured it wouldn't hurt to make sure we had his attention."

"She's his little sister's friend." Steve stretched the truth, hoping Max took his advice to call her up.

"Is she. Well, our boss may not want him giving her rides."

Hard to argue with, Steve thought.

"If he's out at night, though, or outside of town," Powell said, clambering around the seat to pop the trunk open. "We've told his dad we'll see him home, in his own car if he can drive it, or one of ours—" He walked back to lift the trunk, and paused, frowning into it.

"What—" Steve ran to stand next to him, having visions of everything from cases of vodka to duct tape and a shovel. Billy'd packed lidless boxes in, with neatly folded clothes, some LPs, two photo albums, and folded Michelin maps of the central and western United States.

"...he movin' house?"

"...I think he *wants* to." Steve leaned against the car with a groan. Moments later, Billy stalked back, dropped into the driver's side, and slammed the door, huddling to light a cigarette. "You're not supposed to let him leave town?"

"Mmm." Officer Powell frowned into the trunk.

Steve eyed him, and he nodded. "...I better go."

"Call the sheriff. Keep him in the loop." Powell hooked his thumbs through his belt loops, eying the back of Billy's head. "He's...your friend?"

"Yes?" Steve winced inwardly, pushing himself upright again. "I know it's kinda..."

"That boy's primed and loaded." Powell shook his head.

"Yeah, he is," Steve sighed, walking back around to drop into his seat and wait for the patrol car to pull away.

"The hell were you two gossiping about," Billy revved the engine, peeling out between lanes.

"Jesus, learn to drive," Steve scrabbled for his seat belt, and Billy grinned, tapping the brakes to throw him forward, "—what were you, Mike, and El gossiping about?"

"They wanted Eggo waffles." Billy frowned over, taking a deep draw on his cigarette. "Your children are weird as shit."

Steve bit his lips together, thinking of Dustin the war veteran, and Billy smirked over.

"What're you grinning about."

"They are," Steve leaned his face in his hand, shoulders shaking with laughter, "—they're weird as hell, did you—did you seriously fucking take her to buy Eggos?"

"Hell no, we went to IHOP." Billy rolled his eyes. "She tried every syrup, it was disgusting."

"...she didn't mind?" The tightness that clenched his lungs all day as he imagined Billy's limp legs sticking out from under a pile of ten cars El was stacking like LEGO returned, but Billy just squinted over, cocking his head.

"...you think she's weird *and* stupid?"

"No," Steve shook his head, "—no, I would never, ever call El stupid."

"...the sheriff's really protective, huh." Billy's knuckles whitened on his steering wheel.

"Oh. Uh, I'll ask him to call them off. He said if they see you out at night they'll be watching, though. Or, uh, if you leave town."

"...yeah." Billy shut his eyes, leaning his head back, and Steve yelled *something* and grabbed for the wheel again. "It's fine, Harrington, fuck off."

When they finally pulled in to Steve's driveway, Steve half fell out of the car, dragging his bag, and fumbled with his keys.

"Jesus." Billy grabbed them, unlocked the door, and pushed him inside.

"I'm so tired," Steve lurched for the stairs, "—bed, oh my god."

Billy followed him upstairs. “Harrington,” he sang softly, swaying his hips as he lifted his shirt, and Steve let himself fall onto the bed, grinning over.

“There’re sweats in the drawer.”

“...thought you wanted a shower.” Billy paused, watching him fumble his shoes back out from under the covers and attempt to untie them.

“Too tired,” Steve waved, eyes already closed.

He awoke to Billy shouting his name, in the dark, feeling like his heart was about to explode out of his chest, and he had to—*No*, he told himself. *They’re never real, not—Billy Hargrove’s here.* His clothes were cold and wet, and his lungs hurt, so he breathed—at first in gasps—and Billy grabbed his shoulders, pulling him across a wood floor. The shrieks of idiotic middle schoolers in over their heads and the smell of the dank tunnels gave way to the dim light of the stairway. His fingers were cold and numb. Something slid out of his hand and clattered—from the feel and sound, his bat.

“What the hell, Harrington,” Billy was panting against him. “The *fuck*, what is—what are—what’s going *on*, Harrington.” Steve worked the hand that’d been locked around the bat, realizing his teeth were chattering.

It hurt to use his voice. “What’d I do?” He leaned into Billy’s warmth, slowly registering Billy yanking at his fingers, where they were locked around his arm. Steve jerked his fingernails away from the other boy’s inner arm, feeling for the wall.

“The fuck was that—” Billy stumbled away from him, “—you almost hauled me down the *goddamn stairs*, what the *fuck*—”

“...sorry.” Steve let his head thud against the wall, and tried to impose Billy’s hoarse shouting over the residual panic. It was hard to hear over his thudding pulse. “Where’s Dustin, is Will—” he grabbed the banister to pull himself up, and Billy shoved him back down,

crouching next to him.

“He’s *not fuckin’ here*, Steve—”

“Okay, okay.” Steve let himself be held in place, leaning his head into Billy’s shoulder. He smelled like the antiseptic on his head, clean laundry, and his own cologne, and Steve breathed it in. *Billy’s the only monster here.* He snorted. “...I...did I call anyone? Shit.”

“The hell kind of nightmare was that.” Billy leaned in, breath warm against his hair. “You’re insane.”

“Don’t usually get ‘em with you here,” Steve giggled, realizing they were hugging in his hallway in the dead of night. “What good are you.”

Billy took a deep breath. “...one thing about being garbage,” he said into the hair next to Steve’s ear.

“Hrm?” Steve pulled him closer, aware of the January air on his sweat-soaked t-shirt.

“...nobody believes what I say,” Billy breathed into his ear, “—if—if that’s why you won’t—”

“Shit,” Steve sighed, and Billy’s mouth shut with a click. “No, dammit.”

“Fuck you. Sorry. I don’t even care.” Billy jerked away, covering all his conversational bases.

“No—” Steve squinted around, trying to blink back the dark haze in case it was more in his head than the hall, then scooped his bat off the floor. He grabbed the banister again to pull himself up—his knees felt structurally unsound—and leaned on it, stalking back to his room. “Look, I’ll ask Hopper whether I can tell you *if you want*, but he’s probably gonna say no, and he’s gonna wanna know why you know I—do that. Now.”

“That’s why the stupid cartoons, isn’t it. No,” Billy followed, “—hell no, don’t, it’s fine, I don’t need him pissed at me. *That’s* what you do when you’re alone?”

“No, sometimes I just scream—” Steve dropped into the desk chair, pulling his wet shirt off over his head, “—once I called the police and sent them to the Byers’.” He pressed his fists against his eyes, willing the stinging to stop.

“...I can make hot chocolate.” Billy grabbed an old mug from Steve’s desk, hovering by his elbow.

“No, stay here.” Steve laughed, blood pounding with adrenaline. *I almost miss the usual fog in my head, it keeps me from wondering how I’m gonna last the next five years if the only sleeping pill that works is Billy Hargrove—*

Billy leaned in for a hard kiss, swinging his leg over to drop into Steve’s lap with enough force that the desk chair rolled the few feet to the bed. The motion further unsettled Steve’s stomach, but the warmth was good. “Mm,” he said softly, letting his eyes slide shut, losing himself in Billy’s gentle teeth biting at his lips and tongue. As the chair tipped and resettled, unprepared for two squirming basketball players, he dropped a hand to hold Billy’s ass securely on his lap. The other, he slid through the hair above Billy’s right ear, avoiding the gash from the night before.

Billy jerked back with a whine. “*Harrington*,” he hissed, his fingers digging into Steve’s shoulders. “What—”

His hot breath against Steve’s face was coming faster, so Steve opened his eyes, blinking into Billy’s reddened ones. “What’s wrong?”

“Like I’d know.” Billy grinned, watching his face, then relaxed against his chest again, laughing into a kiss.

Steve groaned softly, feeling his hips buck up at Billy’s hot weight. “Mnn. No. What—*nn*.” As Billy ran his thumbs down Steve’s stomach, and along the tops of his thighs, Steve slid a hand down as well, tugging Billy’s black t-shirt up and sliding his hand down between jersey and taut abs. Billy’s whole body went stiff against him.

“Where you headed,” his voice sounded hoarse against Steve’s chin.

“Uh,” Steve paused, “—same...as...you?”

“Liking kissing and blowjobs is normal.” Billy grabbed Steve’s hand, pulling it out of his pants. His hand on Steve’s wrist felt bruisingly tight, and Steve jerked at it. The chair creaked. Billy leaned to whisper against his mouth. “What the hell are you doing, *Steve Harrington*. King Steve.”

“Lemme go,” Steve yanked again, feeling his wrist bones grinding together, “—let go of me, Hargrove—” he yanked himself loose, the chair slowly spinning with the momentum of his flung arm, and Billy fumbled for the tie at the front of his sweatpants, trembling against Steve’s shoulder as he finally jerked them loose and down, and slid a *cold* sweaty hand against Steve’s dick.

Steve yelped, grabbing Billy’s wrist. “Jesus, Billy.”

“It’s just a hand, Harrington,” Billy stared into his eyes, mouth quirking. “Or I got a mouth if you can wait for *five seconds* to get your pants down.”

Steve felt the chill of his room, taking in the shine to Billy’s eyes, and his trembling. “Sorry. I won’t do anything you don’t like,” Steve whispered, letting his eyes close at the thud through his collarbone as Billy dropped his forehead against it. “...how’s your head?” He leaned back as Billy tried to shift closer, and the chair creaked and made a plasticky popping noise. They both froze. “—hey—”

It creaked again as Billy rolled his hips, and Steve let his eyes slide closed again at the giddy tingle up from his dick, and bit at Billy’s lips, pink and hot from kissing. “Billy,” he whispered, his breath warming where his tongue had just been. He slid his hands up Billy’s back, warming the cool muscles. “*Hargrove*. On the bed.”

“Shut it, Harrington,” Billy snickered as the chair tilted again. “Floor’s fine.”

“Come on. Bed. You’re gonna—*Billy*—” he wrapped his arms tightly around the idiot, and Billy went still. “Come on,” Steve whispered into his hair. “Come on to the bed.”

“Fuck you, Harrington, it’d be an *accident*, right,” Billy snorted, but allowed himself to be pushed back off the chair. “Not like I’ve *done* anything—*today*—”

“God,” Steve whispered, trying to reach for Billy’s sweatpants as Billy bit at his fingers, sucking one into his mouth. “If we get on the *bed*, we won’t fall on our asses and it won’t—jesus, let me—”

Billy growled, standing aside to yank at his pants before shoving them down to his ankles, hopping alongside the bed, kicking one pant leg off his foot, and dropping astride Steve’s upper thighs.

“I heard there are classes for strippers, you could work on that.” Steve grinned at being confronted with Billy’s half-hard dick, and Billy punched at him, but let Steve catch his fist and pull him in for a kiss.

He took a shaky breath as Steve rolled to pin him, then laughed up. “What you gonna do now you’ve got me?”

“I dunno,” Steve leaned his forearms across Billy’s, watching his breathing speed up. It was hard not to stare at Billy’s dick—it’d firmed up abruptly with Steve on top—bobbing with Billy’s ragged breaths, and oozing precum to pool across Billy’s abs. “Billy. You want me to stop?”

At the sound of his first name, Billy’s dick pulsed. “Nah.” He swallowed, shuddering, but his skin felt even colder, and when Steve leaned in for a kiss, he flinched. “Come the fuck on. Grab my hair again. I’ll get into it.”

Steve’s stomach clenched, and he rolled to drop along Billy’s warm side, sighing at the ceiling.

“*Fuck* you, Harrington—” Billy swung a leg off the bed, yanking at his arm, and Steve raised his head to free it.

Steve stared at the ceiling, feeling the bed shake as Billy started giggling wetly, curled away from him. “Dude,” Steve rubbed his face, eventually smacking a clumsy hand over Billy’s mouth as he tensed up to, Steve suspected, start yelling about something, “—I’m

not gonna do anything to you, asshole.”

“I know,” Billy shook his hand off, laughing. “You’re hard for me. It’ll be just like having a *girl* in your lap.”

“I mean, I’m not just gonna—just—*lose my shit* all of a sudden.” Steve threw a fist toward the ceiling, miming an explosion.

Billy rolled to laugh against his shoulder. “Kaboom, mushroom cloud.”

“But you gotta tell me if I’m doing something you don’t like,” Steve sighed, rolling to watch Billy’s tense smile as Steve ran a thumb along his cheek.

“S boring.” Billy pushed forward into a kiss, his mouth soft and open, and Steve groaned at the sudden hot hand fumbling with his dick through his briefs.

“God, Billy.” He gripped handfuls of Billy’s shirt, kissing clumsily over his mouth and face as Billy kept grabbing his hands and pushing them back up above Billy’s shoulders.

“D’you want my mouth,” Billy whispered. “Feels just like a mouth, any mouth, Nanc—”

“...you want mine?” Steve cut him off before he had to get mad, feeling like his veins were running honey—warm and sweet. Like no monsters had ever existed, not in any stupid teen movie Billy Hargrove would be in.

“Fuck no, I know those rules,” Billy started army crawling down the bed, “—I’m a stupid piece of shit, but I’m not gonna—”

“What rule.” Steve grabbed his head, holding him in place for another kiss. “Hargrove.”

Billy’s eyes fluttered shut, but then he wrested his head away, grinning. “The ‘get too queer on you and get my head smashed into the fucking dumpster’ rule.” Billy tugged at his sweatpants, and Steve lifted his pelvis.

“I’m not—oh *jesus*, Billy—” he lost his train of thought as Billy’s mouth slipped over his dick clear up to his lower belly, taking him in with no hesitation. “Christ, how many cocks have you sucked, you’re fucking—you’re—fuck—*Hargrove*—”

Billy snickered around him, and Steve had no idea what he said then, under the influence of the vibrations of Billy’s throat. Probably mostly laughing about how short a time it was gonna be, and entirely profane. Billy’s tongue was everywhere he wanted it, wet and hot—stroking the bundle of nerves under the head, and down his length again—which was just as well, because with all the muscles in his body feeling like they were drawing in to the wet heat of Billy’s mouth, all Steve could do was focus on breathing and try not to pull his hair.

Billy pulled off, looking up through his lashes, and Steve whined. “Just yank on it, *jesus*.” He butted his head against Steve’s hand, and Steve got a handful of curls.

He mumbled something around Steve’s dick as he sunk his lips over it again, and Steve breathed deep, chanting ‘fuck, *jesus*, fucking hell,’ as the vibration undid him.

“—shit, sorry,” Steve breathed, “Sorry, sorry, I—I—shoulda warned you, *jesus*.”

Billy pulled off, eyes lowered, and wiping his mouth.

Steve flailed an arm down and dragged him back up the bed, rolling to wrap both arms and a leg around him, panting. “God. I don’t...I don’t even...know what all I just... yelled.” He bit at Billy’s stubble.

“You should be thanking me for all that *practice*.” Billy mumbled, tense against him.

“Mmm. Thanks,” he giggled, hugging him tighter. “Thank you, thank you...happy to help you out anytime. With your...study drills.”

Billy pulled back, studying his face.

“Oh my god...” Steve let himself roll onto his back. “I haven’t felt this good since like. Shit. Everything happened.”

Billy snorted, ducking his head. "Yeah, whatever. Lemme use your shower."

"No, wait. You still all 'hands off' about your dick?"

"...you don't fucking want my cock in your hand, Steve, I'm not *that* stupid."

"Okay—" Steve kissed his eyelids, his forehead, and the end of his nose.

"S'not my *mouth*." Billy growled, grabbing Steve's chin and holding it in place to stop the kisses Steve was peppering over his face. "The fuck are yoummph," he groaned, kissing back.

His mouth's even hotter than his face, Steve thought, trying not to giggle. *He wears more makeup than Nancy, and he tastes like me, gross.* "Oh, you're shaking," he snorted. "Your balls are gonna *explode* blue. Okay, c'mon. C'mere."

"Let me go be okay in the shower," Billy grunted into another kiss, but pushed closer, running his hands up Steve's ribs.

"How about you jack off," Steve combed his fingers through the hair at the sides of Billy's head, "—and I kiss you. I'll just kiss you. Your favourite thing."

"Shut up, you're not that good a kisser." Billy leaned in to him, holding his breath as he tried not to pant. "Jus'...my hand on my cock, right," he whispered.

"Go ahead." Steve cupped his jaw. He could feel the skin he was kissing getting hotter, and he almost slid a hand down Billy's neck and collarbones, but kept his hands where Billy had kept moving them. He felt Billy shudder against him. "God..." Steve kissed across his eyelashes, his fingers on Billy's neck reverberating with his thumping heart.

"It'll—it'll get on you," Billy mumbled, but allowed himself to be pulled so close Steve could feel Billy's clenched knuckles jerking up and down against his belly.

“Fuck...” Billy’s kisses got clumsy, his eyes fluttering shut, and Steve twined his fingers tighter in the silky brown curls, clenching his fist.

Billy moaned, going limp and solid against him. “...I need another fucking shower,” he whispered around kisses, and Steve snorted painfully, laughing against Billy’s sweaty shoulder.

“Hey.” Steve ran his nails over the base of Billy’s skull and up the back of his head, grinning as an entire basketball player tried to fold into his hand like a cat.

“Mmn,” Billy huffed back, pressing his face against Steve’s t-shirt.

“I forgot about a condom.” Billy went still. “I just...” Steve sighed. “...how many dumpsters did you get slammed *into*? What if I had *syphilis*?”

“From *Nancy Wheeler*?” Billy barked with laughter. “What the fuck.”

“There were ‘before Nancy’ times. God, you shoulda heard the riot act she read me. You *ever* use condoms?”

“...give the fucking blow job back.” He could feel the heat of Billy’s face through his shirt.

“Jesus. Go to the fucking doctor, you moron, find out whether my dick’s gonna fall off. And don’t put anything *in* you without a sock on it.”

“I wasn’t fucking...outside the bar, taking all comers—” Steve snorted at the image, and Billy elbowed him, huffing a laugh into his shoulder.

“You gonna do it, though?” Steve rubbed Billy’s taut neck with his thumb, and Billy sighed.

“Fuck you.”

“If that’s somethin’ you wanna do,” Steve leaned to mouth at his ear, “—if I can trust you to stay clean...for me.” He grinned at Billy’s shudder.

“Don’t fuckin’ tease me,” Billy growled against his chest. “Just. *Sometimes*, I’d—”

“I mean I don’t wanna *know*, just if you’re gonna keep climbin’ in my lap—”

“Are we *going steady* now,” Billy snorted against his jaw, and Steve’s hand stopped stroking his hair. “Shit, no.” Billy punched the bed, shoving himself off it. “I didn’t mean that. I didn’t mean that, Harrington, fuck.”

“*You...seriously* wanna be my *boyfriend*?” Steve rolled to frown over the edge of the bed, and Billy scrambled back against the wall.

“I know that’s not—I know my—I’m sorry—fuck, Harrington,” he laughed, letting his head fall back against the wall with a smack. Steve opened his mouth, still coming up with a reply, and Billy shut his eyes and knocked his head back into the wall again, and again, hard enough that the clock rattled.

“Jesus—” Steve scrambled off the bed, yanking him away from the wall, and running his hand up the back of Billy’s head. It wasn’t sticky. “*Jesus*, Hargrove.”

“Sorry,” Billy snorted, but his skin was cold and damp. “She shoulda just thrown me in a fucking dumpster. I didn’t mean it, *jesus*. Please don’t.”

“I’m not mad, christ, c’mon...come here, don’t—”

“Don’t act like you don’t give a shit,” Billy grabbed the hand Steve was trying to inspect his head with. His hands were freezing. “Tommy says Jonathan Byers fucked your girl and you showed up with that *baseball* bat, c’mon, *Harrington*, what’s it gonna be, is he the one all over your *fucking nailbat*, I’m fucking *sorry*, I won’t say that shit, I promise--” he laughed, wiping his nose, his eyeliner streaking. “Promise from Billy fucking Hargrove, because that means fuck-all, *damn* it—”

“Oh,” Steve blinked. *Yeah, actually, that probably looked pretty bad.* He rubbed his face. *Jesus, Steve.* “Uh. Shit, no.”

Billy grabbed his other wrist so tightly the bones ground together. “Lemme go. Just let me the fuck go. I’ll go home, I won’t tell anybody. You know I won’t fucking tell anybody, nobody’d fucking believe me—”

“No, seriously, shut up—”

“I’m *shutting up*, Harrington—”

Steve tried to lift one of his hands, and Billy jerked his head away, breathing shakily.

“Calm the fuck down. Billy *fucking* Hargrove, don’t do any crazy *Billy* shit, okay,” he kept his voice level, “—it’s—I don’t *care*, shit, it’s fine. Tell—tell anyone. Anything. I’ll kiss you in *class*, I do not give a *shit*.” He tried to suppress a snicker, and it turned into a giggle. “I will fucking date you, if that’s what you want, stop giving yourself *brain damage*.”

“I don’t wanna *date* some psycho with a bat, I’m not asking you to *prom*,” Billy growled.

Steve couldn’t stop giggling, the image of Billy Hargrove as Prom King not helping. “God help whoever lets you make a speech.” He left his hand on the ground, but ran his thumb over Billy’s naked toes.

“Don’t fuckin’ tickle me.” Billy let go, scooting back.

“Y-you have a mouth that—that doesn’t *unfold*,” Steve gasped, miming the demodog’s unfurling with spread fingers, and he cackled at Billy’s blank face, “—it’s g-good enough for me.”

“...you’re *unhinged*,” Billy stared, “—the fuck is that, an *alligator*?”

“*Fuck* yeah.” Steve let himself fall to the side, his side starting to cramp with laughter. “Bring it. They can call me the Gatorfucker.”

“You’re a—you—*basket case*.” Billy sat wide-eyed, elbow at a weird angle as he tried to let Steve lie on the floor giggling without breaking his wrist.

"I am," Steve nodded, wiping his eyes against his upper arm, "—oh my god, I am. I see *monsters*." He tried to hold a straight face, but blew out his cheeks in a cackle at Billy's glower.

"Are you on *drugs*." Billy let go of his wrists to keep from being yanked forward as Steve rolled onto his back, kicking his feet.

"Maaaaaaybe I should be." Steve grinned at the ceiling, wiping his eyes.

"Telling *me* to see a fucking doctor." Billy looked hilarious, Steve thought, naked and spooked against the plaid wallpaper, and Steve started giggling again, clutching his stomach.

"Still—" he swallowed, trying to catch his breath, "—still wanna date? We could keep watch on the roof. Then a nice patrol through the snow at, y'know, two o'clock in the morning. I'll keep you safe. You can kiss off the monster blood." His giggles ceased at the memory of Jonathan and Nancy clinging to each other.

"You thought I was a *monster* earlier," Billy got up and started gathering his clothes, "—f'I hadn't yelled so loud, maybe you'd be a murderer. Nice, Harrington, really excellent."

"Byers is *fine*." Steve rolled his eyes. "You really think he'd be walking around if I hit him with that thing? That bat didn't get anywhere close to you, moron."

"Then what the *hell* were you dragging me around for?"

"Oh come on," Steve flailed a fist toward Billy's foot, missing by several inches. "I thought we were being attacked, it was a stupid dream, I was thinking 'save the civilian!', I wouldn't have hurt *you*."

"...you dreamed you were *saving me*." Billy stopped to frown down. "...what do you mean *civilian*."

"...nothing," Steve sat up, stretching, and grinned as Billy's eyes strayed to his shoulders, then down his chest. "Come on, stick around. Boyfriend."

"Shut up," Billy snorted, walking a wary circle around him, but

dropping to sit on the bed.

"You really *are* Danny Zuko, lusting after Stevey Dee--"

"What the *shit*--"

"I was paying *so much attention* to Travolta's ass in that, how did I not even notice—"

"I'm gonna kick *your* ass—"

"Be nice to your sweetie-pie. How we gonna work this," Steve rolled onto his stomach, propping his chin up with his elbows on the floor. "We could go to the movies? I guess..? It's dark."

"Shut up. You're not funny."

"It'd be just like an affair, actually. We'd have to tell people we were —"

"Shut the *fuck up*, Harrington."

"Fine, whatever. You trying to leave town?"

"...what."

"He searched your trunk." Steve leaned to look at the clock. "Wanna order food?"

"With what *money*," Billy curled up on the bed. "Hadta quit my job and move to the sticks. And he's told everybody I'm a fucking...*serial killer* by now."

"...Heard there's a mall opening up," Steve hopped up to rifle his desk for a rubber-banded stack of bedraggled menus, "—I bet the new businesses'll hire. You had a job?"

"Yeah, fuckhead, I had a *job*. You think *he* bought me that car?"

"Huh. You want pizza or Chinese?"

"...I don't give a shit," Billy swallowed, following him downstairs to lurk around the doorway as Steve ordered a whole lot of meat and

noodles.

In the front room, naked with the phone in his lap, Steve grinned over again.

“What now,” Billy sighed.

“We’re covered in jizz. Come on, shower.” He wandered over, sliding his arm around Billy’s waist.

“...not getting my mouth on your dick again, asshole.” Billy smirked, leaning in to a kiss.

“S’fine, we’ve only got fifteen minutes.”

After ten minutes of scrubbing whatever surface was closest, whether it was on his body or Billy’s—particularly if it made Billy huff a soft laugh—Steve piled out of the shower and grabbed a towel, leaving Billy cackling against the shower wall. “The hell was that, your majesty, you really needed to scrub my elbow four times?”

Steve stuck his head back in for a kiss, flicking Billy’s shoulder to get his attention. He blinked, but leaned forward, his ass still under the shower, and Steve kept his body as far from the water as he could drying off. “...we look like those kissing salt-and-pepper shakers,” he whispered, leaning in again.

“Mmn,” Billy hummed back, grinning against his lips. “You’re gonna have to get the food naked.”

“Worth it,” he pulled back, closing the shower door.

When Billy wandered down, his hair was mostly dry, and Steve kept his hands in the blood-free zone hauling him close. “...lemme wash your hair later.”

“It’s not that bad.” Billy allowed himself to be pressed against the counter, kissing Steve’s mouth over the next three sentences he tried to start.

“Oi,” Steve bit his lips together, lifting his head to escape, and ran his hands up and down Billy’s arms, “—it’s got a load of blood in it. I’ll be careful, just lemme wash it in the sink.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Billy hefted himself onto the counter, pulling Steve’s head in with both hands to hold him in a convenient kissing position.

Steve lost himself in clean soft Billy Hargrove smells until the doorbell rang. “Mm—Billy—” he pulled back, then leaned back in, stopping to really appreciate the firm thighs on either side of his waist, the muscles under his hands on Billy’s abs, the heat of his mouth, and the intent dark eyes watching him for sudden motions. “I’m hungry. For noodles,” he specified, and Billy snorted. He lingered through another two rings before running off, leaving Billy to bury his face in his hands. When he returned, he handed over the cartons, watching as Billy scrounged for plates.

“...your cupboard handles are dusty.”

“Yeah, well, there’s no hot chocolate in there.” Steve watched, then shrugged, meandering around opening drawers before holding up folding napkins victoriously and spreading them on the table as placemats.

“How do you...do you even know how to wash dishes?”

“I know how *soap* works.” Steve rolled his eyes, leaning to lay a kiss on Billy’s shoulder as he slid by with the silverware.

“...what’s that look for.” Billy finally asked, portioning out the Mongolian Beef, and cutting the odd eggroll in half.

“Why are we even using dishes,” Steve stepped closer and stabbed his fork into the bigger half, “—it *comes* in dishes.”

“...I just imagined you setting up a romantic dinner. Would you cut the pizza box in half? Who needs candles, just set the lid on fire.”

Steve gasped. “I’d do my boy better than *thUF*—” he choked as Billy elbowed him in the stomach.

"I will fucking murder you." Billy whispered in his ear, but Steve leaned into him, laughing.

"Chill out, c'mon, dinner and a movie."

"...better not be singing mice." Billy allowed himself to be drawn out into the front room to the coffee table.

"Laserdiscs are over there, pick something out, if you're sick of Fievel."

"What's Ghostbu--"

"Holy fucking christ no." Steve waved it away.

"Wh--"

"No no no." Steve leaned over and pushed it back into the crate. Billy very slowly slid it back out, biting back a grin, and Steve leaned to thunk their shoulders. "Noooooooo," he whispered. "You don't know how many times Dustin's watched it. He recites along with it, it's so fucking annoying, you have no idea—" He leaned in for a stealth kiss attack, sliding the case out and quickly tossing it under the couch while Billy raised an eyebrow, but hummed against Steve's mouth. "—if you want to win him over, ask him about it, but do not make me sit through that fucker again."

"Why would I wanna win *him* over." Billy rolled his eyes, pulling out The Howling.

"I dun~no." Steve sing-songed, shifting to block Billy's swift elbow.

Halfway through The Howling, Billy leaned in to nock his head under Steve's chin. "Are you afraid of...werewolves," he whispered, and Steve snorted a laugh.

"That's definitely it, you're on to me. Hey," he leaned to kiss Billy's head, getting another weirded-out glance for his trouble, "—come on, I can wash your hair."

"Do I *stink*." Billy tried to sniff at a hank of it, wincing as he tugged.

“It’s all clotted, come on.”

“...can wash my own fucking hair.” Billy allowed himself to be drug by the hand into the kitchen.

“Just where you got gashed. There’s blood in your hair, I can see what I’m doing.” Leaving his captive feral by the kitchen sink, Steve ran up and found the shampoo, returning to find Billy shirtless, and trying to comb his fingers through the matted edges of his hair.

“How’d they let you in IHOP, you look like a corpse from a horror movie,” Steve turned on the water, folding his arms, “—it takes a minute to get hot.”

“I tied it up, it kinda—” Billy fluffed the top, hiding the gash, and tucked the bloodied hanks underneath. “El—Eleven?” He frowned over, mouth quirked.

“Or Jane, but I mean, if she told you something else...”

Billy rolled his eyes. “She was really into it, took half my bobby pins and elastics.”

“You...sat in IHOP giving hair tips,” Steve said slowly, feeling his cheeks heat.

“No,” Billy snorted. Steve raised his eyebrows, and Billy turned on the cold water.

“Are you giving me a bath or what.”

“What.” Steve made a face, but pushed his sleeves up.

“You picked me up from the pound, you gotta deal with my mange.” Billy grinned over, bracing his arms on the edge of the sink and leaning in.

Steve tested the water, his cheeks flushing. “Just wondered whether your hair tips were as good as my hair tips.” He cleared his throat, grabbing the sprayer, and ran his fingers up the back of Billy’s neck and head to get his hair over the sink. “...have to see who has better hair, Dustin or El.”

"The hell d'you know about curls," Billy snorted, but his neck was turning red under Steve's fingers.

"This too hot?" Steve sprayed Billy's wrist, and he jumped.

"...s'fine."

"Okay..." He started wetting it down, remembering the tangles Nancy fought with, and trying not to yank. The water on Billy's right side ran reddish-brown. "Tell me if it hurts—"

"Fuck you," Billy's voice was muffled, and his clench on the edge of the sink was white-knuckled, but he turned his head easily as Steve ran the sprayer behind his ear, and up the back of his neck, and pushed his head down into the sink so the water didn't run down his back.

"You're doin' good," Steve said, for no real reason other than the tension shaking Billy's shoulders, but he snorted, relaxing forward a bit as Steve let go of the sprayer and grabbed the shampoo. "Okay." He started gathering up the long curls, working them into suds, and scratching his nails and thumbs in circles around Billy's scalp, and Billy made a noise that started as a grunt but kinda turned into a whine. Steve narrowed his eyes at the scabbed area he was carefully avoiding. "That hurt?"

"...n-no." Billy's voice sounded hoarse, so Steve slowed up a bit, trying to be more careful about tugging the hair on the right side of his head.

"...almost done." He reached under to turn Billy's head and work the shampoo along his hairline. His hand on Billy's neck informed him Billy's heart was pounding, and kept swallowing. "...seriously," Steve turned him the other way, "—are you okay? You feel like you're having a heart attack."

"Shut up," Billy mumbled, hipchecking him into the counter.

"You want conditioner?" Steve offered, grabbing the sprayer. "Keep your eyes shut."

"Yes I *fucking* want conditioner," Billy growled, and Steve grinned,

ducking his head to see—sure enough, Billy’s face was as red as his neck and shoulders.

“I’ll just take my time then.” Steve rinsed carefully, his left hand on the back of Billy’s neck to keep the water back. Billy shivered when he took it away, and Steve couldn’t resist smacking a kiss there, just to watch him jerk and glower over his shoulder.

“You don’t have to do *conditioner*,” he muttered. “I’m not gonna die of one day—”

“Yeah, you didn’t exactly say please.” Steve got a handful of conditioner, watching Billy laugh and wipe his face.

“Fuck you, Harrington.” He leaned back in, and Steve held his hands down within view, sidling up against him but not actually touching his hair. Billy snorted, turning his face away. “Please, your Majesty, honor me with—*jesus*—” His knees banged against the cupboard doors as Steve held Billy’s forehead with one hand, pressing up his skull with the other. Billy grabbed for the sink, and Steve caught him around the waist.

“Christ,” Steve cackled into his shoulder, “—did your *knees* just give out?”

“Shut the fuck up.” Billy leaned his head in his arms, wiping his face.

“Lemme—lemme grab you a chair,” Steve giggled, waggling a foot over to grab a kitchen chair and drag it closer. “Kneel on this.”

“...should be healed up soon.” The chair rocked as he clambered onto it. He felt shaky under Steve’s fingers.

“Are you seriously okay?” He started another rinse, after his fingers sank into freezing curls. “Are you cold?”

“I’m just—having—I don’t fucking know, just—*screw* you,” Billy mumbled, leaning deeper into the sink.

“...you still want the conditioner? I could—”

“I want the fucking conditioner, are you *fucking deaf*.” Billy rubbed

his face, wiping his nose, and Steve bit his lips, nodding.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m on it.” He took a while, uncertain what would happen when he finished, and Billy had to lift his head. *Maybe he was topping up on tequila while I was paying for the pizza*, he frowned around, shifting his feet as Billy leaned into his side, *or maybe the stress of not punching anyone for hours broke him*. When he was done, he kept his hand on the back of Billy’s head, holding him while he grabbed for the towel, then dropped it over the back of his head, pulling a grumbling, muffled Billy into his arms for a brisk towelling. After a few minutes, he rucked up the edge over Billy’s face, smirking into his narrowed eyes and set jaw.

“Who the hell was that for.” Billy slammed the heel of his hand into Steve’s chest, shoving him away and stomping to the fridge. “What do you have to *drink*, Harrington.”

Steve, who hadn’t been inviting his alcohol suppliers over, and had lost the main privilege of living at the party house—free liquor—crossed his arms. “The hell are you mad about.”

“The fuck was *that*—” Billy waved at his hair, slamming the fridge so hard the plates in the cupboard rattled. “You—who the hell are you in love with, are you still fucking—Nancy Wheeler? Go—fucking go get her.” He pulled the towel over his head again, stalking into the front room.

“What are you even talking about.” Steve followed him out, scooping up a container of chow mein and digging in as he dropped on the couch.

“Let’s go,” Billy punched his shoulder, “—let’s go fuck up her new man. Drag him out.”

Steve choked, smacking his chest, chewed, and swallowed before staring over. “What the *hell*, dude. What have you got against Jonathan Byers.”

Billy scooted in close, his grin tense. “You keep lying to me. Don’t fucking pretend that whole—that hairwashing bullshit was for *me*.”

“...you had blood in your hair,” Steve leaned away. “I just washed *blood* out of your *hair*—”

Billy laughed, grabbing the front of his sweatshirt. “Ha. No way, Harrington. No fucking way. Come on. Don’t waste it on me. Let’s go get her—”

Steve shoved his hands off, clambering over the arm of the couch and padding back into the kitchen to lean against the counter. “Shut up. Leave ‘em alone.” Billy came up and slid his arms around him from behind, all warm breath and firm muscles, and Steve groaned into his noodles. “Fuck off, asshole, we’re not—we’re not gonna *lynch* somebody ‘cause you think I need a girlfriend.”

“Not a girlfriend,” Billy kissed his neck, “—*her*. You got some...Romeo and Juliet shit going on. She’s not *dead*, just go get her.”

“She’s too smart for me,” Steve snorted. “Wasn’t gonna last. She’s going off to college, I’m just...staying in Hawkins. It’s over, man, what the hell—” He leaned his head back, trying to see Billy’s face, and ended up in an awkward, over-the-shoulder kiss that still made him light-headed. “Jesus,” he panted, sliding the chow mein container onto the counter. “Anyway. Didn’t take you for a matchmaker.”

“I’m not--”

“Why the hell you trying so hard to get me to bang somebody else when we’re making out,” Steve let himself be turned around, sliding his arms around Billy’s neck to kiss him.

“Just feel like a blow-up doll, letting you pull your pretend boyfriend *bullshit*.” Billy accepted the kiss despite his glower.

“My what?” Steve laughed. “Yeah, that’s what I’d do with a sex doll, wash its hair.”

“Or a dog,” he’d gone still, leaning away.

“What?!” Steve cocked his head.

“Didja want me to *wag my tail and beg for more*, Harrington,” Billy whispered in his ear, then elbowed out of his arms. “Want me to eat out of your hand? Eat shit. Fuck you.” He shoved off the counter and stalked away to the front room, leaving Steve squinting after him in annoyed confusion. “I’m starting the movie back up,” he yelled from the front room, and Steve meandered out, plonking himself on the opposite end of the couch and crossing his arms.

After a few minutes trying to forget about Billy and remember what was going on in the plot, Billy crawled over and flopped with his head in Steve’s lap, and Steve groaned.

“What about Carol.”

“What,” Steve sighed, running his fingers through damp curls.

Billy leaned his head into it, closing his eyes. “Carol. Fuck Carol. She’ll still invite me over.”

The bark of laughter surprised Steve as much as it did Billy, who jumped. “Why would I fuck *Carol*. Gross. She and Tommy are soulmates. One day he’ll propose and they’ll just repeat ‘Do you wanna get *married*,’ after each other like parrots, like, for infinity.”

Billy snorted, coughing. “Their vows will be ‘I know you do but what do I.’

Steve cracked up, bending to kiss his face, and finally stopped because Billy wasn’t laughing. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know, what is this shit you keep doing,” he stared up, eyebrows knitted, “—you just fucking. Kissed my *forehead*.”

“Is it out of bounds,” Steve grinned down, and Billy rolled to face the TV instead.

“...we’re missing the movie.”

“If you want me to stop touching you, maybe get out of my lap.” Steve slid his hand along Billy’s side, and watched him close his eyes, curling closer.

“...shut up.”

When the credits rolled, Billy grabbed up the dishes, shoving Steve back into the couch when he tried to follow.

Steve wandered in to find him washing the dishes, dug a towel out of the drawer, and was shoved into another chair.

“The fuck, Hargrove.”

“Almost done.”

“Let me dry, and you’ll be done *sooner*.”

“No hurry.”

“It’s—” Steve frowned at the clock, “--it’s only nine-thirty, but I’ve already had a *long fucking night*.” He got up again to pull Billy’s back against him. “I wanna *sleep*. If you aren’t gonna *let* me, go home. If you’re staying, get the *fuck* in my bed.”

Billy relaxed against his chest. “...I can sit and stay, your majesty.”

“Okay, Sparky.” Steve rolled his eyes. “...hey.”

“Mm?” Billy dried the last fork, leaning back into him.

“You *can* just stay here. Just come over, it’s fine.”

“What.”

“If I’m not here, Ms. Williams said you can go there.” Steve drug him towards the stairs, and Billy’s feet scuffed at the floor.

“What the hell—*fuck* both of you. *Fuck* you, you—”

“Is that a ‘thank you’, I hear? Thank you, Steve! Thank you! Thank you to Ms. Williams, and her dogs!”

“Fuck do you mean *stay here*,” Billy yanked free, “—shut the fuck up. I can’t *stay here*. She’s not gonna—”

“If you want to.” Steve pulled him back. “We’re not—”

Billy shoved him against the wall. “You trying to get me sucking your cock again? Just fucking tell me.” The shove had knocked the air out of Steve’s lungs, and he took a deep breath, jerking his head back as Billy growled in his ear. “You want me again?”

“I wanna *sleep*.” Steve pushed him off, but grabbed his hand to haul him upstairs.

Billy yanked away to walk around the other side of the bed as soon as they were in Steve’s room, dropping back to sit against the headboard.

“...aren’t you gonna sleep?” Steve paused, half out of his sweatshirt.

“Just got up from a nap, remember?” Billy stared outside, “—I actually sleep at *home*.”

“What’s out there?” Steve crawled over the bed, squinting out the window.

“Nothing! Jesus! I was looking for *cops*, you fucking...*nutcase*.” Billy groaned as Steve slid up next to him, aiming at his mouth, but kissing his cheek and ear as he ducked away.

“Mmm,” Steve licked his lips, “—did you find the spare toothbrushes?”

“Still got the other one.” Billy rolled his eyes, and Steve yanked him back in by the shoulder for another kiss, grinning as he felt the skin against his lips heating up. “Fuck are you *doing*.” Billy blocked him with both hands, but didn’t push him away, and Steve leaned his face against his spread fingers. “You’re such a *nerd*.” Billy let himself drop sideways, smiling up. “The hell did you think I’d see?”

“Stay-Puff Man.” Steve pulled his sweatshirt the rest of the way off and padded off to the bathroom.

“You eat too many marshmallows, if he’s on your mind,” Billy yelled after him, and Steve leaned back around the door, laughing.

“No, it’s—never mind. We can watch it.” When Steve returned, Billy had deigned to take his boots off and stick his legs under the covers. Steve flicked the light off and slid in, sighing at the smooth, cool feel of the sheets and the weight of the blankets. “...where are you?”

“I’m over here,” Billy snorted. “How close d’you—*Harrington*—” He grabbed Steve’s hands, and Steve thought to his satisfaction he’d at least go to his grave having made Billy Hargrove sound like an offended librarian.

“C’mon, I wanna—” He tugged at Billy’s arm. “Hug you, I guess. Get in here.”

“*Why*,” Billy muttered, but slid in, and allowed Steve to test his theory that Billy’s chest was warm and smelled nice. He laid his head on it, sliding a hand up Billy’s abs, and the body under him shivered.

“Sorry.” Steve grinned.

“...I can feel you grinning.”

“This is nice.”

“...shut the fuck up, *Harrington*.”

Steve opened his mouth to retort, considered what compliment would make Billy flush down to his navel but not elbow him in the face with the rush of emotion—and then he was jerking awake, wiping his mouth, as Billy’s shoulder collided with his jaw. The dim reflected light of the streetlamp showed him Billy’s head jerking. He was mumbling something under his breath. Steve leaned his head out of the danger zone, lifting his hand and patting Billy’s abs, and Billy shuddered, shaking his head slowly back and forth, and curled onto his side with a groan.

“Hargrove,” Steve tried, keeping his voice even. “Billy Hargrove.”

Billy’s ribcage jerked again, and his eyes opened. He stared at the wall as the saltwater that had collected in his eyes spilled to the pillow, then shut his eyes again. “...d’jou drool on me,” he asked thickly.

“...think so,” Steve leaned on his elbow, heart racing, “—um...was that a nightmare?”

“Nah,” Billy cleared his throat, curling tighter, “—just *meditating* on a nice *fishing trip*.”

“Was it, uh, was it your dad—”

“No, *actually*, I was in a *trunk*, asswipe.” Billy flung an arm out to smack him.

“...shit.”

“You fucking—*kidnapped* me, the fuck are you—*snuggling*—get off—”

“Sorry.” Steve scooted away to sit at the end of the bed, and listen to Billy’s shaky breathing.

“Go ahead.”

“What?”

“Go ahead say whatever the *hell* you’re gonna—”

“I was thinking ‘Your turn!’” Steve admitted, and Billy choked on a laugh. “...shit, that means it’s my turn again.”

“...that how it works?”

“Apparently.”

“You gonna drag me outta bed again?” Billy’s foot, a fuzzy lump under layers of blankets, nudged Steve’s knee.

He squeezed it. “...I don’t always run for it.” It was hard to tell under the blankets, but he ran his thumb over what was probably the arch of Billy’s foot. “I fell asleep in the kitchen Monday afternoon and dreamed Mike showed up to yell at me because he’d found his parents half eaten, and handed me a foot—”

“What the f—?! Why the—” Billy paused to listen, but his silent laughing was shaking the bed.

“—and of course Dustin was there, and Mrs. Byers, and we had to go find El and Will—she’s—”

“Will’s the kid that...had the funeral?”

“Yeah, so she’s screaming and crying that we have to get to him, we have to save Will, I can’t let him *die*, but the only car we had to drive was a *stick shift*, and so I’m trying to go for help and the engine keeps dying and she’s yelling how it’s my fault if he dies, and Dustin’s yelling *driving advice in my ear*—”

Billy cracked up. “Fuck, you are *broken*, what the fuck is wrong with you--”

Steve snorflled, trying to suppress laughter, and rubbed tears from his eyes. “I know.”

After a silence that felt like at least a quarter-hour, Billy took a deep breath, and kicked the blanket into Steve’s hip. “I can teach you to drive stick.”

“Thought you were already working on that,” Steve snickered, and Billy kicked him again, laughing.

“Shut up. You want me to?”

“...yeah, sure.” Steve ducked his head, grinning.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you so much for wandering in! Lemme know if you liked my story--I lovelovelove hearing from people! Kudos! Short comments! Long comments! Questions! Constructive criticism! Comments as extra kudos! Thanks so, so much! XD

(I try to reply to each one, but if you don't want a response to your comment then please say "No reply please" or "Whisper" so I'll know not to reply.)

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5. Set it on fire, see what remains

Summary for the Chapter:

Yeeep the chapter count went up AGAIN. But! Next chapter's a good way done, and I'm confident of this chapter count! The last chapter's an epilogue, and also more than half written.

Billy can't go from terrible to sorta okay all at once, he's still gonna have some...backslides.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry this has taken so long--I'm frantically trying to get the next chapter done since the new season's out, but a lot's been going on, I got married, for one thing?

Thank you to tbehartoo, EmoButterfly, SusieCarter, SionainnShay, lifebloom, and of course BAVZEL for cheerleading and brainstorming!

Crap, so sorry, didn't edit the chapter number after I lost my first draft!

With his nose properly pressed into the smell of Billy Hargrove, sleep was uneventful, and Steve woke groggy, dreaming he was tunneling out of a loaf of fresh bread. His head didn't throb, his brain seemed to be receiving the full palette of colours, and he hummed as he hugged the blankets, kicking his feet and pulling his pillow over his head.

His stomach growled.

Yanking the thickest blanket off the bed, he padded downstairs in search of the bread smell, to hear Billy singing softly, then leaned around the corner to see him shirtless in stocking feet and very tight jeans, dancing around a pan on the stove. He flipped a pancake—

Steve's mouth started over-supplying saliva, and he swallowed—and slid back across the floor to the sink to turn the water on, grab a bottle of tequila out of the mess of measuring cups and spoons, and take a couple swallows.

"Pour some sugar on me," Billy sang under his breath, "—ooo, in the name of love/Pour some sugar on meeeeeee—" He shuffled around to dump the dirty utensils in the sink.

Steve leaned in the doorway, until the hip swaying got to him, then waited for another pancake to be settled in the pan to cook before sliding his arms around Billy's folded ones.

"*Fuck* you, Harrington!" Billy jerked in his arms.

"Pancakes?" Steve frowned around the kitchen, letting his hips sway with Billy's.

"Found some mix in there. The fuck do you *eat*," Billy snorted, but graciously leaned his head to the side when Steve started kissing his neck.

"Mmm. Take-out. There's some TV dinners in the freezer."

"...and pancakes." Billy shrugged, and Steve grinned, biting his shoulder.

"Thanks, man." Steve licked over the marks he was making. "They look good."

"...I can fucking *make pancakes*," Billy snorted, ducking his head. "You know I can *read*, right." He slid the finished pancake on a plate in the oven.

"You're such a pain in the ass." Steve licked his lips to blow a loud raspberry against the side of Billy's neck, sliding a hand up his shirt as he tried to wriggle away just as the phone rang.

"Steve," Nancy breathed, when he answered.

"...yeah? Oh." He grimaced at the clock.

“Yeah, you missed first period. Everything okay?”

“I slept in.” He tried to keep his grin from being *too* audible, but she laughed.

“...is Billy there?”

“Yeah, uh, he’s making pancakes.”

“There’s no syrup,” Billy announced from the kitchen. “I’m putting ice cream on them.”

“...they’re gonna be so good,” Steve whispered.

“You sound like you slept well,” she fished, but he didn’t mind.

“So well. He’s like a good luck charm, all in all I must’ve slept like...”

“Twelve hours.” Billy dropped to sit next to him against the wall, and handed over a plate.

“*Twelve hours*,” he breathed, licking where the Rocky Road was dripping over the edge of his plate.

“...I guess he was the right raccoon to feed.” She still sounded doubtful.

“He’s kinda fun sometimes.” Steve took a big bite of pancake, and groaned.

“He’s...fun.”

“I need to hang up and eat these pancakes,” he informed her.

“You...sound...good. I, uh, we didn’t really get a chance to talk, but I did talk to Will—oh, I gotta go, I’ll see you later.”

When he’d hung up, Billy was watching him sidelong. “...*fun*.”

“We had a slumber party.” Steve chopped up his pancake, inwardly grinning at Billy’s glower.

"I'm not *fun*, Harrington."

"I've got ice cream pancakes." Steve packed his mouth full, then grinned over—a technique he'd learned from Dustin to end conversations.

Billy stared. After a long moment of watching Steve chew, Billy put his plate down, opening his mouth, but just then the kettle whistled. "...hot chocolate," he said, and Steve leaned over to kiss him, licking the chocolate taste out of his mouth.

"This must be why I was dragging you along." Steve sat his plate down and ran in to the kitchen to turn off the shriek.

"...what?" he heard faintly.

"Dream Steve was saving you from the monsters," he called, fixing up two mugs of sugary caffeine. "If you hadn't screamed your head off, we might have ended up anywhere."

"...you tried to drag me down the stairs," Billy yelled back.

"You coulda walked down. I wasn't risking my...pancake maker, I guess?"

"Dream Steve appreciates a good cocksucker," Billy laughed.

Steve dropped next to him, handing over the bird mug, and chugging his powdery-tasting instant coffee/chocolate paste. Billy wrinkled his nose, but sipped at his own, poking the bites of pancake around his plate.

"Hey," Steve leaned to bump shoulders, "—you coming back tonight?"

"...when the hell do you do homework." Billy stared at him.

"I'll actually get some done today," Steve stuffed the last of his pancake in his mouth, "—fince I swept."

"...fince—oh. Swallow your food. Maybe?"

Steve shrugged, taking his empty dishes back in the kitchen. “I’d be fine with a movie, probably, but—I mean, it’s weird, I like having you over. Oh—” he leaned his head back out, “All that shit in your car? You can leave it here, if you want. Your clothes and stuff. If you need more room.” He turned on his heel to wash his dishes, hearing silence, then a clatter from the front room, and stomping toward him.

“The fuck are you talking about. What do you *want*.” Billy stalked up, open hand raised.

“Sure hope I don’t drop this plate,” Steve hummed, and Billy growled, then hefted himself up onto the counter.

“The fuck is going on. Just *tell* me, I’m not a complete moron, I’ll know what to *do*, just—”

“Shit, sorry,” Steve slid the plate under the hot water and stepped over to pull Billy against him, “—just. Some weird shit. Some lab released some weird shit.”

“Am I *bait*?” He leaned in for a kiss as Steve blinked up at him. “Just tell me what you want.”

“What?”

“You’re too fucking nice,” Billy whispered in his ear, “—you pretending to get over Nancy? What is this shit.” He held Steve’s head close, leaning in for a kiss that left Steve’s lips slightly numb and his heart pounding, and the taste of chocolate and tequila in his mouth. The room felt chilly against his face when Billy pulled away. “Tell me the fucking rules, Harrington. Use small words I’ll understand.”

“Jesus,” Steve sighed, “...shut up, Hargrove.”

“Why d’you keep wanting my face up here,” Billy whispered in his ear, his hands sliding down Steve’s back to his butt, and squeezing, “—when you could have my face down *there*. You know I’ll *do* it—I’ll do whatever the fuck you—”

Steve kissed him just to shut him up, sliding his hands around and up

under Billy's shirt to the warm skin he'd found the night before and gotten an offended yelp. It worked again, prompting a rapid-fire explosion of expletives, and he staggered back under the weight of a ticklish, squirming Billy Hargrove scrambling away from his fingers, off the counter, and wrapping both legs around his waist. Steve wrapped his right arm around Billy's shoulders, and his left hand under his ass, stumbling back against a chair. He squinted in pain as Billy's hands yanked at his hair, grabbing him around the neck and shoulders. "—easy there—I'm not gonna drop you, dude."

Billy slowly unwound his fingers from their clench in Steve's shirt and hair, and lowered a leg to the ground, disentangling himself with his eyes lowered, and his ears red.

"Hey—" Steve kissed one of Billy's retreating hands, and Billy swallowed, turning back to grab Steve's shirt and shove him back into the chair with another sudden, hard kiss that pinched Steve's lip between their teeth.

That done, Billy shoved away without making eye contact, stomped out of the kitchen, and slammed out the front door.

"What the hell!" Steve yelled after him, turning off the water. He ran up to put actual clothes on, and heard a knock as he hopped in one leg of his jeans, scrambling for his watch. It came again twice as he did up his fly and ran down the stairs. He opened the door to see Billy's back, kicking chunks of broken bottle off the steps.

"It won't start," he muttered, taking a deep draw on his cigarette and kicking another shard until it came loose from the melted and refrozen snow, "—my car won't start."

"Is it the battery?" Steve suggested, having had to start the car periodically in cold weather before he could legally drive.

"Who gives a shit, I'm *stuck*, I—" He sat on the cleared step. "Can I use your phone to call..." he took a slow breath, "—I need to call home."

"Fuck no," Steve dropped next to him. "I've got cables. I'll give you a jump, first."

Billy grabbed his face and kissed him, fingers in his hair, still breathing smoke like a dragon, and Steve leaned into it, his own fingers more careful around the scab above Billy's right ear.

"...how's your head, babe?"

"Stop calling me that, it's weird," Billy snorted, following his lips for another kiss.

"Mmn," Steve relaxed into it, enjoying the warm minty smokiness of Billy's mouth, the brush of his stubble, and the wet heat of his tongue, "—mn. Billy. Lemme jump you."

"Yeah." Billy breathed against his mouth, letting his jacket slide off his shoulders, and Steve yanked it back up, pulling him close for a quick squeeze.

"Your *car*, Hargrove."

It *was* the battery, and Billy's shoulders relaxed like a dropped marionette as the engine caught. He leaned his head against the steering wheel, taking deep breaths.

Steve reached in the driver's side window. "You all right?" *Once I get my fingers in his hair, it's like they're magnetized*, Steve thought with dismay, running his thumb up and down the side of Billy's neck, his fingers in the silky curls. "Kinda still taste like tequila."

As usual, Billy's smirk looked half amused, half wary. He didn't answer, just stuck his cigarette in his mouth and gunned the motor, wagglng his fingers out the window as he pulled into the road.

In class, Nancy's corduroy slacks whooshed as she sped to Steve's desk to look him over. "You're alive."

"I dunno," Steve raised his eyebrows, "—did you wanna check my pulse?"

"I don't see any bruises." Her eyes narrowed. "Are you coming to the game Wednesday?"

"Oh hell," he let himself slide down in his seat, "—I think Dustin got Mike to make me a character. Are you playing?"

"Probably not. We should talk, though." She shrugged, smiling goofily, and waving to Jonathan.

"...is Jonathan coming?" He frowned over.

"Nah, I think Will likes to hang with just his friends." She was still waving like a nerd, smile huge, and Steve sighed, leaning his face on his hand, and watching her talk. "—and I think that might be too many players? He's already got Will, Lucas, and Dustin, I know he invited Eleven, Lucas wants Max there, Dustin wants you..."

"Oh, I'm sure Dustin wants you too," he watched her bite her lip in a shy grin at Jonathan, and wondered if her arm would get tired. Whether she'd have to learn the parade wave pageant winners used. Jonathan was waving back—from like two seats away—but he caught Steve's eyeroll, and lowered his hand.

"No, wave, wave," Steve pushed Nancy's bag against her back, nudging her up the aisle. "You two look like morons, just go annoy *him*."

She squeezed his hand—hers were so much smaller and thinner than Billy's, he thought, nearly letting a snicker escape as he thought both of the night before, but with Billy doing the stupid courtship wave dance she was doing—and she tried to saunter *casually* over to Jonathan. Instead of confidently dropping to sit on his desk, though, she got over there and...waved some more, tucking her hair behind her ear, and Steve covered a wistful snort.

After class, she pulled him to her locker. "So I talked to Will."

"Shit, yeah," he winced, "—sorry I slept through lunch yesterday. What'd he say?"

“Oh, well, I mean, he kinda wants to talk somehow without Dustin, Mike, and Lucas, if you can...you slept through *everything* yesterday,” she cocked her head. “You look better today.”

“Yeah, we can figure something out, if Jonathan will let him get me alone,” he grimaced, “—what the hell did *you* tell *him*— but yeah, I slept more than I have since...” He ran his fingers through his hair, thinking. “I think the tunnels? I was fine until I knew they could just come *back*.”

She nodded, clutching her books to her chest, jaw set. “We’ll be ready for them.”

“I’d kinda wanted to do other things with my life, I mean, we can’t be everywhere at once, what if something—” he waved an arm, nearly smacking Jonathan in the face.

“You guys are talking about Will?” He frowned between them, and Steve dropped his books, crouching to take a long time to pick them up, and hoping his face would be less red by the time he stood.

“He, ah, he’s coming over Wednesday, to play Mike’s game.” Nancy failed at covering the awkwardness.

“...I know?”

Steve couldn’t see the expression on Jonathan’s face from his new home on the floor of the hallway, so he stopped pretending to be clumsy, and glanced up.

Jonathan’s eyes were wide. “What’s going on. What happened.”

“No, it’s not—” Nancy gently clasped his hand, and Steve dove in to the conversation.

“Will asked about his *love life*, he was too embarrassed to ask you, just pretend you didn’t hear anything?”

Jonathan’s eyes narrowed, but he frowned between them, holding Nancy’s hand. “Why would he go to—either of you?”

“Maybe Dustin’s been building me up?” Steve shrugged, hoping his

pounding heart didn't translate to his face getting redder. *I kinda understand why Billy wants it a secret suddenly*, he thought, his stomach clenching as he imagined the faces of the classmates passing around him curling in disgust, or Hopper no longer clapping him on the shoulder. *What if they don't want me around kids anymore?* He took a deep breath.

Jonathan rolled his eyes. "He can tell me *anything*, he knows that—"

"Maybe he just wants to listen to music sometimes and not always have a big problem," Steve suggested, familiar with the eternal sympathy on Nancy's face, and Jonathan cocked his head, considering.

"...yeah, okay. I won't bug him."

"You're still his favorite," Nancy nudged him with her elbow, and he grinned, ducking his head. Steve sighed, sorting his textbooks unnecessarily.

"...but one of you'll tell me if anything...big happens?"

"I think we'll let that be up to him," she smiled back, "—but I don't think anything big is going to happen."

Steve had a burst of inspiration. "He's just thinking about things. You know, Dustin liking Max, Lucas liking Max, you two being together, he wants to know everyone will stay friends, it's weird for him. He missed a lot of it."

"Oh!" Jonathan blinked, then grimaced. "Oh, okay. That makes sense, I guess." He had his arm around Nancy, and she shrugged at Steve.

"I'll see you tonight, then?"

"Oh. Yeah," Steve held up his hand to wave, and stopped, "—you guys have made waving weird now." They laughed, shifting their feet, and Steve turned to go to class.

The D&D game was about vampires, apparently. Dustin had said “I want to suck your blood” so many times Lucas just smacked his face with a pillow every time he opened his mouth, in between bossing Max around and pulling the Basic Set book towards himself every time she asked a question.

Having spent the last twenty-four hours watching a similar set of tense shouldergazers, Steve waved to Eleven, who was staring at Mike, brows knitted. “Hey, how about you team up with Max, or me, or Nancy—” he waved to her where she was holding up the doorway, “—‘cause these little douchebags are all being more annoying than usual.”

Dustin gasped. “How dare you.”

“Yeah, *I’m* about to go home.” Max bared her teeth, yanking the book back.

“I read all the rules,” Eleven frowned between Mike and Max, “—why can’t I play?”

“Play together,” Nancy clambered by the row of chairs, “—Will, could you help Steve? You guys are terrible at explaining.”

Max sighed. “Look, I guess this looks fun and all—”

“Don’t leave!” Lucas pleaded, wide-eyed. “I’m sorry! El, come over here! We’ll leave you alone!”

“We just want you to *win*.” Dustin snorted, huffing over to sit next to Lucas, who was scrambling to move to Eleven’s seat.

“Why are you explaining different rules to me,” she frowned at her book, then at Mike, “—I thought I learned the correct rules. Did I learn the wrong rules?”

“These are *optional*, they’re our *house* rules based on the *magazine supplements*—” Mike huffed.

“Eleven,” Max waved her over with the book, “—he’s just gonna grow up to be a tax accountant, he thinks this mess is fun.”

“There is some older English in the text.” Nancy crouched next to Eleven with some printouts. “Here—”

“Are we gonna *murder some vampires* or *what*, here.” Steve settled in at the opposite end of the table from Mike, next to Will, who flashed a shy grin at him.



By the *FABULOUS Ihni!*

"Oh hey, Steve, Dustin's mom is taking Max home, could you drop Will?" Nancy asked, turning the page she was showing Eleven.

“Oh,” Steve shrugged, “—sure.”

“I want to ride with Steve.” Max leaned around Eleven to get a look at the printouts, but Nancy and Eleven leaned away.

“And meeeeee, take me too, drop me off laaaast.” Dustin leaned in, dropping his head on Steve’s shoulder, and Steve shoved him back, grinning and shrugging to Nancy.

“*That’s* why I got the invite, you guys just wanted a taxi.”

Max leaned around Will and punched Steve’s shoulder, raising her eyebrows at him, and he shrugged, trying to figure out a route that gave Max whatever she wanted, with nobody that didn’t know about he and Billy in the car, and Will a chance for his awkward as hell questionnaire. “I *can* drop everybody, but it’ll be, uh, Dustin, then Eleven, then Max, then Will.”

“That makes no sense,” Dustin frowned over, “—I live right by Max, so Billy can live on his trashpile—”

“We don’t live *in* the junkyard,” Max snorted, “—I mean, Billy might.”

“Probably,” Lucas put in, grinning over, and most of the heads around the table nodded, “—he probably sneaks out at night and nests in the broken bottles. Eats the rusty razor blades.”

“Maybe he wants to punch the Lorax and spread pollution to the world.” Mike rolled his eyes, glaring up the basement stairs at the door, through which they could hear his mom’s voice and the word ‘Clifford’. “I think I’d start liking him.”

“He’ll become a pollution supervillain,” Dustin cackled.

Max snorted. “Rotten Billy.”

“Living in a trash can like Oscar the Grouch.” Lucas made a face.

“Corruption Hargrove,” Dustin suggested, “Billy the Foul, stalking the trash whenever there’s smog...”

“His big attack can be ‘Extinction Event,’” Mike put in, shuffling papers, “—does his name still have to be ‘Billy’? I mean, you wouldn’t call Darth Vader, like, D. V. Or is it like...Demolition William?”

“I tried calling him Willy, he didn’t like it.” Max shrugged. “Maybe Demolition Willy.”

Will wrinkled his nose, shaking his head, then blinked large eyes at Steve, who had raised his character sheet to hide his face.

“Come on, though, I get to come, we’re pals!” Dustin threw his arms around Will, staring into Steve’s face from two inches away. “Why’re you trying to get rid of me? *Eleven’s the farthest!*”

“Eleven’s all right,” Will said in a small voice, and Steve snorted, rubbing his face. Will scrambled for tact. “I mean, Mom’s just been so worried, it’s nice to be out. Longer.”

“Smooth.” Max patted his shoulder, and he reddened.

“Fiiiiiiine,” Dustin huffed, frowning between them, and narrowing his eyes at Steve. “We’re going to talk about this, young man. Don’t you laugh at me, *Steve Harrington!*”

“Now you sound like Billy,” Steve hummed as Dustin gasped in horror, and Steve cocked his head, actually reading his character sheet. The only part he could make sense of was his name. “...hang on, I’m a girl?”

“That a problem?” Max smiled over from where she and Eleven had their heads together.

“Nancy helped design the campaign,” Mike said breezily, and Steve eyed her wide, innocent smile. Her companionable perch on the stairs suddenly looked more like she was surveying prey.



"Anyway." Mike smacked his pad of notes on the table, and cleared his throat.

"Hang on." Dustin reached over to clasp Steve's shoulder. "Do you

need hot chocolate for this darksome and frightening tale?"

"Fuck you." Steve shoved him off, grinning. "I'm not in withdrawal yet."

"ANYWAY!" Mike rolled his notebook, waving it at Dustin. "Shut up, dickwads."

"We're *doing* this thing." Lucas waggled his eyebrows, and got smacked, being closer to hand than Dustin.

"One of your group of adventurers receives a *letter*," Mike began.

"I'll read it," Lucas grabbed it, and Mike slid down in his chair with a long groan, "—'Hail to thee of might and valor, I, a lowly servant of Barovia, send honor to thee. We plead for thy so desperately needed assistance.'"

"We will help these people, and about our feats, I shall write glorious song!" Dustin shouted, standing, and Mike leaned over for full Haymaker range of motion and whacked him again. "Dude!" Dustin hissed.

"Shut up, y'all," Lucas rolled his eyes, "—'The *love* of my *life*—'"

"It's Max!" Will gasped, and Max flailed around Eleven trying to hit him, bright red. "The love of *Lucas'* life!"

"*'The love of my life,'*" Lucas hid behind the letter, voice suddenly higher, "—says the *letter writer*, 'Ireena Kolyana, has been afflicted by an evil so deadly—'"

"Wait, that's me, actually, Ireena Kolyana." Steve frowned at his sheet.

"It's *actually* Max." Will blinked innocent eyes up at Steve, and this time Eleven leaned to the side to let Max smack him with the book. He cackled, batting her away. "It's true! Max and Lucas, sitting in a —"

"Fuck off, Will." Lucas shook the letter at him. "My *character* doesn't know Max! And I'm not my character, or I'd be in love with *Steve* —"

Dustin snickered.

“Lucas should be rescuing *Max*.” Mike nodded, grinning with relief at not having read it himself. His cheeks were pink as he glanced at Eleven.

Eleven raised her hand. “So we’re rescuing Steve, though? Steve, not Max?”

“Why am I the princess?” Steve wrinkled his nose.

“Nancy did it!” Dustin pointed.



"The princess —" Lucas tried again.

"Princess Steve!" Dustin yelled, punching the air.

"She's *suffering* from an evil *so deadly*," Lucas shouted, smacking the table, "—even the good people of our village cannot protect her. She languishes in fear and nightmare—"

"Oh come *on*." Steve felt his cheeks heat, as even Lucas dissolved into giggles, and Mike's smirk stretched evilly. Max *cackled*, leaning her head against Eleven's shoulder, and even Eleven was smirking at Will, who was leaning his head on the table, shoulders shaking with giggles. Steve raised his chin, folding his arms. "If I'm in a glass coffin, I'm going home!"

Lucas wiped his eyes, trying to breathe. "The letter says, 'I would have her saved from this menace.' Who *is* this, Steve, your fiancé?"

"I will marry only my true love," Steve announced, slumping lower in his chair. "I don't *care* if one of *you* idiots rescues me."

Max erupted into giggles, leaning back in her chair and wheezing with laughter. "Your—your true love—Steve—oh my god—I'm telling—I'm *telling*, Steve—"

"Don't you *dare*," he hissed back, trying to restrain his own horrified cackles.

"*I'm* rescuing Steve!" Dustin wailed.

"Isn't it Nancy? His true love?" Lucas leaned to ask Mike, who shrugged, watching Eleven's bemused smile at Max's sniggering. "*Ahem*," Lucas cocked his head at Max, "—Oh. No, hey, dudes, this isn't Steve's fiancé, it's his *dad*. 'I, the Burgomeister of Barovia, send you honor—and despair. My adopted daughter, the fair Ireena Kolyana—' Wait. Nasty," Lucas wrinkled his nose. "His adopted daughter is the love of his life? Gross, Nancy!"

"That part's in the book," she rolled her eyes.

"Uhhh." Dustin squeezed Steve's shoulder. "I'm sorry, dude. At least you're pretty?"

"Well then, come rescue me, already." Steve made a face at Nancy, and her smile grew. He leaned away suspiciously.

“Oh, *also* gross,” Lucas wrinkled his nose, “—‘Fair Ireena Kolyana has been these past nights bitten by a vampyr.’ Some *gross dude* is chewing on your *neck*, man.”

At this sympathy, Max yelled incoherently, slumping over the back of her chair, Will yelped with laughter, and Nancy leaned against the wall to support her giggles, clapping for Lucas’ performance.

Eleven opened her mouth, closed it, and whispered something to Will, who nodded, wiping his eyes. She turned a narrow-eyed stare on Steve. Dustin, Lucas, and Mike were cocking their heads, frowning at each other, then at Steve. He popped his collar, hoping it’d hide the hickies Billy’d left on his neck, and waved the group onward—meeting eyes with Nancy, who had a hand over her mouth to smother her giggles. Steve narrowed his eyes at her, baring his teeth.

Lucas’ jaw firmed—Steve suspected Max would have to dodge a lot of questions later—but he pressed on. ““For over four hundred years, this creature has drained the life blood of my people. Now my dear Ireena languishes her nights away—”

Here, Steve dropped his forehead to the table, as Max nearly fell off her chair in paroxysms of laughter. Lucas just raised his voice and kept reading. “I *said* she *languishes*, ‘ because of the *unholy taint* caused by this vile beast.”

“Steve,” Dustin squeezed his hand gently, obviously not getting the joke, but delighting in Steve’s horror, “— *are* you languishing?”



"Sh'up," he said, into the tablecloth.

"Ooo. Guys, hey." Lucas flapped a hand for their attention. "It's not just Princess Steve. 'There is much wealth in this community. I offer

all that might be had to thee and thy fellows if thou shalt but answer my desperate plea. Come quickly, for her time is at hand! All that I have shall be thine! Kolyan Indirovich’.” Lucas folded it, nodding seriously. “Wow, do you think somebody has to kiss Steve? It’s for a *lot* of money.”

“Gross!” Mike snorted, but Max buried her face in her arms, gasping with laughter.

“I guess anybody’s better than my creepy asshole dad.” Steve made a face, ignoring Nancy’s slow cackling collapse against the stairs.

“He’s still ‘*only marrying his true love*,’ though,” Will giggled.

“Yeah, well, I have *taste*,” Steve muttered, and Max whooped.

“You don’t,” she wheezed, “—you don’t, you really don’t—”

“I will kiss you, Steve.” Eleven reached around Will to pat his shoulder, grinning. “On the hand. If someone has to.”

“Ouch!” Lucas and Mike were cackling nearly as hard as Max, though they only had half the joke.

“If she *must*.” Mike snagged the letter back.

“Might just have to floozy it up with your rescuer,” Max raised her head, wiping her eyes, “—I mean, if you want out of the coffin.”

Steve’s lungs hurt from laughing. “You’re all terrible. You want me to marry some random dipshit who makes out with me when I’m asleep?”

“Point!” Nancy called, still wheezing. “If there’s any of that, it’ll be a blown kiss only.”

“Aww, I’ll do it.” Dustin’s mouth twitched, before he burst into giggles—the last holdout sunk. “If everybody else votes to *leave* you.”

“You little douchebags,” Steve muttered, grinning.

“Okay!” Lucas punched the air. “Let’s go kiss Steve!” Max, Eleven, and Will echoed the chant. “Kiss Steve! Kiss Steve!”

Dustin yelled “He’s mine!” then shrugged at Steve’s raised eyebrows.

“Guys! That’s *not* the *adventure*,” Mike wailed, falling sideways on the table and giggling into his arm.

unrescued, you all suck.”

“We barely *arrived*, dude.” Lucas shoulder checked him, climbing by to try and convince Max to stay over.

“I can’t.” She narrowed her eyes at Steve, over his shoulder.

“We could both stay here.” Lucas flapped his hands in the pockets of his flak jacket.

“What part of ‘can’t’ is confusing you, dipshit—” She bared her teeth at him.

Lucas quailed. “I just—I don’t—”

“Get used to it,” she grunted, then turned back and punched his shoulder. “I’ll be okay. Really.”

“What,” Eleven frowned between them. “*Are* you okay? Really?”

Lucas and Max looked at each other, and shared an inordinately sincere shoulder-bump.

“All right, everybody who doesn’t live here or next door, come load up.” Steve glanced down as Will sighed, sliding down in the chair and kicking his feet. “Come on, I’ll drop you last.”

“Okay.” He shrugged, hunching his shoulders and swallowing.

“Anybody eating this pizza?” Max held it up, and Dustin held up his hands.

“It’s all yours.”

Dustin’s ongoing whine about being the first drop-off was quelled by his position in the shotgun seat, where he proudly seated himself after Max, Will, and Eleven had climbed in the back. He was obviously trying to get them all in a debate about the likelihood of a haunting in Hawkins, lingering in the car after they pulled up at his drive, and finally, Max just reached around to open the door and shoved him out, climbing after him and settling in the front seat.

Dustin leaned back in, waving jovially, and Steve waved back. "Yeah, yeah, soon. I promise."

"We'll let you rot in your glass coffin if you break promises," Dustin yelled after them.

Steve started the drive to Hopper's cabin, getting directions from Eleven. She had her arm around Will, who was breathing harshly.

After watching them in the rearview mirror for a second, Steve pulled over on to the shoulder, biting his lips. "You okay?"

Will nodded.

"You can keep going," Eleven squeezed Will's hand, and he leaned into her.

"Uh," Steve frowned at the two of them, then Max. "...Will, d'you want Eleven here?"

He nodded, swallowing.

"How the fuck come everybody wants to talk to Steve. What's going on." Max frowned between them. "Nancy made sure *Will* got a ride from —*oh*." She leaned back and prodded Will's shoulder. "You *know*. Don't you?"

"I don't know." Eleven frowned between Steve and Max, and Steve turned away to stare out at the road, and pull his knees up.

"He's fucking *Billy*, he's *kissing* him, he's letting my *brother* put his *gross face* on *his* face, they're touching *everything*—" Max just *kept going*, and Steve muttered "Christ," flailing a hand over to flick her cheek. He and Will took identical shaky breaths.

"...*Billy* is the *vampire*." Eleven's eyes widened. "The 'gross man chewing on your neck'."

"Oh my god." Steve wrapped his arms around his head, trying to suppress giggles.

"That's why they were laughing." Eleven raised her eyebrows,

nodding.

“Yeeep, yeah, okay.” Max folded her arms. “We haven’t even passed my place yet, I can grill you later.”

“What?” Steve frowned over.

“Just drop me off and—” she waved a hand, “—let them do whatever —” she waved at Will, whose fingers were clenched in the knees of his pants. “Lemme talk at you tomorrow morning, Steve Harrington.”

“Eugh. Okay.” Steve stomped the gas and swung the car around in a u-turn, Will whooped, and Max grabbed for the roll bar.

“Jesus fuck.” She glared over. “You asswipes deserve each other.”

At her house, Billy was smoking a cigarette on the curb. He sauntered over, and Max groaned, then snickered, shaking her head. “Man, you are not going to get that ‘private talk.’” She climbed out as Steve rolled his window down for Billy to rest his elbows in it. Crouched against the door, the light from the house blocked by Steve’s car, he was nearly invisible.

“Hey, Harrington.” He smirked in, reaching to lift Steve’s hand off the steering wheel, and Steve squeezed it, conscious of Will’s wide eyes in the rearview mirror.

“Hey.” He grinned back, running his thumb over Billy’s palm, and Billy snatched his hand back, head cocked.

“...what’re you doing tonight?” He rested his chin on his arms, and Steve snorted.

“You hitching a ride?”

“Just to the next town, stranger,” Billy grinned, leaning his head in, and Steve leaned away. “Come on, get in.”

Billy’s eyes narrowed, but he came around, and slid in shotgun, nearly leaping out of his skin as Eleven said “Hello again,” from the depths of the back seat. Steve swallowed a laugh, then choked in

earnest, and Billy shoved him against the door.

“Hello,” Will said in a small voice, and Billy squinted.

“How the hell many of you are back there?”

“Eleven,” said Eleven, and Billy glowered at Steve.

“You’re Steve’s...” Will’s voice dropped to a whisper, and Steve gunned the engine to get off of Scary Hargrove Street as Billy glared into the backseat.

“I’m his *what*.”

How are there so many shitty parents around that I’m...what, now? An older brother? A...dad? A babysitter who gives Important Talks? He braced himself. “Uh, Billy’s...” He could see the silhouette of Billy’s head turn to look at him, and his words fled.

“Speak up, Harrington,” Billy turned in his seat so his back was against the door, “—the fuck is this going.”

“Will saw you kissing,” Eleven spoke up, Billy inhaled sharply, and Steve slapped his hand over to dig his fingers into Billy’s knee.

“We did do that.” He let go at Billy’s lack of an explosion, patting around for his hand, and finding his ankle, which he squeezed. “Don’t tell anyone else, okay? Billy’s dad’s already an asshole to end all assholes.” Billy’s pulse was pounding against his fingers.

“M-my dad says I’m a faggot too,” Will’s voice was hoarse, and squeaked around the edges. Steve’s eyebrows were nearly at his hairline as he tried to think of somewhere they could pull over without anyone recognizing his car. *I’m four years older*, he tried to convince himself. *I’ve seen more, I can handle this.*

“Fuck, are you?!” Billy asked, startled.

“I don’t *know*,” Will sniffled. “I don’t know—I’m different, even *Mom* says I’m different—”

Steve turned and parked in front of a random house. “Um. Uh...”

He leaned his head against the steering wheel, trying to ignore Billy's shocked snickering.

"I'm sorry," Will sounded like he was rubbing his face, and suppressing sobs, "—I'm sorry, I'll shut up—don't—I'll stay quiet about it—"

"No, it's okay, it's okay," Steve sat up again, flailing around. "Okay. I mean. Even if you *are*," he tried to imagine what Mrs. Byers would say, wishing Will would just *talk to his mom*. "Even—even if you are. Queer. If you're a—a queer. Is—is that so bad?"

Billy kicked him. "Well he can't just go *telling* people, *jesus*, Harrington. He'll get his ass kicked."

"Yeah—yeah, I know," Steve floundered, "—but, uh, look, Eleven doesn't mind."

"I don't mind," she confirmed, sounding both certain and mystified.

"Jonathan. Jonathan wouldn't mind. Nancy definitely won't." *Note to self*, Steve thought, *tell Nancy to read Jonathan and his mom all those depressing queer stories. Ha.*

"Mike will not care," Eleven said in a low, determined voice, "—or Hopper."

"...didn't your mom bring you back from the dead, or something," Billy snorted. "She a good mom?"

Will must have nodded, because Billy continued. "Then she'll love you anyway."

"Okay." Will's lungs were starting to calm down, though he still sounded half underwater, and his breathing was all off-kilter. "Okay. But Lucas and—Lucas and Dustin are gonna hate me—I'm already Zombie Boy and now—"

"What the fucking nailbat's for, right?" Billy muttered, glancing at Steve. "Zombie Boy, what the fuck—"

"No! No, I mean, they won't, I'll talk to them," Steve offered, lifting

his hand to reach back, then lowering it, feeling it wasn't his place to pat Will's head. "If I tell..." He took a deep breath, and Billy's foot nudged his side again. "Once they know about *me*, we'll, uh, know what they'll think."

"Max doesn't care." Billy cocked his head. "Wait, no," he snorted. "She just hates me either way."

"She does not." Steve slid his hand up Billy's pant leg again, to the bare skin of his calf. "It'll—it'll be okay with the people you *like*, Will. Just—"

"Wait a few days." Eleven's voice got muffled, and Steve squinted back to see the lump of her hugging Will.

"Yeah," Will swallowed, "—I—I just—I feel like a *liar*, I wasn't—I wasn't gonna say anything *ever* but I feel like I'm *tricking* them..."

"And then I fucking grabbed Steve Harrington under the kitchen window." Billy let his head smack against the window, and Steve started giggling.

"Super romantic. Falling snow."

"It wasn't *romantic*, Harrington—"

"So was," Steve cackled. "You covered in snow, me waving a bat, half naked, huge circles under my eyes—did I even have shoes on?"

"Will wants waffles," Eleven said, leaning up between the seats. "Could we go somewhere and have waffles?"

"I do?" Will laughed as her hug squished him against Billy's seat.

"They make you less lonely," she confirmed, and Steve rubbed his face.

"Uh—"

"There's the IHOP, over where they're putting the mall in," Billy said over him. "I haven't eaten. They have those gross syrups she likes."

Steve grinned again, ducking his head, and putting the car back in gear. “Yeah sure, I’ll take you on a date, Hargrove, all you had to do was ask.”

Billy went stiff. “I wasn’t *fucking aski*—”

“Shush the eff up.” Steve pinched him, as Will’s head appeared between their shoulders.

“You guys go on dates? You can date?”

Here we go, Steve took a deep breath, feeling his breath hiss a bit with tension. “S-sure! We can date! Here we are, going to a—to a restaurant, that’s a date.”

“Nancy and Jonathan have movie dates,” Eleven poked her head up next to Will’s. “They sit and watch movies. One of them had a man in it that was an elephant. They hold hands.”

“And we have done that, that is a thing we have done.” Steve nodded several times too many.

“Jesus christ.” Billy let his head thunk against the window.

“My mom used to go dancing,” Will said in a small voice, and Steve threw all caution to the wind.

“Billy dances in my kitchen,” Steve said, ignoring the muttered instruction to fuck himself from the other side of the car, “—I—I could invite everyone over and dance, if I wanted. With Billy.”

“Go to fucking Disneyland, hold hands on the roller coasters,” Billy sighed into the window, and Steve bit his lips against a grin, and the urge to pull over and kiss him.

“Or a, like, a drive-in movie, we could even make out. We should actually do that.” Steve cocked his head, catching Billy’s glance out of the corner of his eye.

“*Disneyland*,” Will whispered.

“What’s Disneyland?” Eleven asked, and Steve sped around a corner,

grinning, as Will tried to explain carnival rides.

“Around here we’ve got the arcade, but not *roller coasters*,” he sighed.

“...there’s probably some shitty state fair,” Billy offered. “She wouldn’t know the difference. Apparently.”

“We could all go,” Will leaned between the seats, “—we could go this summer. Steve. Steve, can we?”

“Sure, why not.” Steve shrugged. “Who likes cotton candy?”

“Jesus christ,” Billy said, again, as Steve pulled into the parking lot. Will and Eleven scrambled out before he’d put on the parking brake, and Steve leaned back in his seat, closing his eyes.

“You realize we’re married now,” he informed Billy, who missed the door handle, and made a scrabbling noise against the leather.

“What the *fuck*.”

“We told *Will Byers* we’re taking him *on a date*. For *cotton candy*. It’s forever, dude, ‘till death do us part.” Steve let his head roll to look at Billy, who was staring back in the light from the IHOP windows.

“Are you drunk.”

“Sacred vow, man. *You* gonna tell him we’re talking out our asses? It’s *legal* now.”

“...your mom fucking dropped you as a child.” Billy found the door handle, and stalked towards the IHOP.

In the booth, Eleven and Will were sitting on the same side, watching avidly as they slid in. Billy widened his eyes at Steve, jaw working. Steve gave him a menu and thumbs-up, and ignored the resulting middle finger shielded from Will and Eleven by the menu.

“Okay, guys, have your orders figured out by the time I get back, an excellent babysitter lets people know that’s what’s going on—” He

squeezed Billy's shoulder, probably got another middle finger at his back, and went in search of a phone. Getting a dollar changed for the pay phone outside killed a few more minutes, and then he had to actually dial what felt like the summons for whatever'd been hanging over his head since he ran into Dustin hunting his pet Demodog.

How bad can it be? he muttered to himself. *At least it'll be the end of...waiting for...something.* When it connected, Nancy's mom was weirdly flirty until he said he was Steve Harrington, and then didn't want to find Nancy at all. Finally Mike grabbed the phone and sighed "What."

"I don't want you, get Nancy." Steve rolled his eyes.

"You've got me," Mike huffed.

"Fine. Could you lend me your trigonometry notes?" Steve raised his eyebrows, and Mike sighed like his lungs had a slow leak.

"Nancy!" he bellowed into the phone, and once Steve's hearing returned, she was there.

"Nancy," Steve repeated, feeling a bit shaky now he came to the pinch. He took a deep breath and blew it out through his cheeks.

"Yeah?" She had her eyebrows raised, he could tell.

"Uh. It's Steve."

"Yeah, I hear that." Now she was laughing at him.

"Uh, um. So—first, could you let Mrs. Byers and Hopper know I've got their kids at IHOP, and I'm sorry, usually I'd have said no, but Will was crying—"

"Oh no, is everything okay?"

"I...think so? He was telling me about his shitty dad..."

"...okay?"

"I panicked and he thinks Billy and I are some immortal love story

now—”

She barked a laugh, smothering giggles. “*What?*”

“I don’t know, he wants us to go on a date *and bring him* to the *state fair* this summer to eat *cotton candy*, so I think—”

“Oh my god,” she squeaked.

“I think we’re basically, uh, married, as far as Will’s concerned—”

“Billy’s gonna *murder* you if he finds out.”

“Oh, uh.”

“Steve. He’ll kill you. With his fists.”

“No, um, he’s here. He ah, he suggested it.” He listened nervously to the silence on the other end of the line. “Really. I was right there in the car when—”

“No *kidding*,” she snorted, then dropped her voice to a deep whisper, “—*This* is the dimension of imagination. It is an area which we call ...*The Twilight Zone*.”

“Shut up,” he snickered. “I know. But I wanted to ask...” He lowered the handset, staring out of the little booth at the ground. He could hear quizzical noises from the earpiece, and took a deep breath, lifting it again. “Yeah. Sorry. I just—could you—you know all those awful queer movies and lectures you made me listen to after—after Barb.”

“...yes. It wasn’t—it wasn’t just because of Barb, that was stuff I needed to know, and they weren’t awful just because they weren’t funny—”

“I think it’s stuff that, um. Uh—other people might need to know.” He took another steadying breath. “I mean, I’m going to have to tell people eventually, probably, Hopper might find out, the little shitstains are noticing—”

“...oh.” She was quiet for several too many seconds, and he covered

the mouthpiece, giving himself a silent verbal ass-kicking in privacy, then bravely lifted it back to his face.

“Do—do you. Is it—” he rubbed his face, “—fuck. Fuck. Nancy—”

“It’s fine, I’ll do it, I just,” she paused again, and he scrabbled at his hair, “—I think—I guess I didn’t think about you changing your life this much for *Billy Hargrove*, I mean, is it...is he *worth* all this?”

He covered the mouthpiece again to giggle. It sounded unhinged. *What would a damn good babysitter do*, he took a slow breath, setting his shoulders, and telling himself it was idiotic to feel like a heroic firefighter, rescuing Will—but he did, a bit, *feel* like he was. “It’s not—I mean. I—it’ll—I’ll still stare at Rob Lowe pictures after Billy, y’know, I might as—I might as well?” His voice betrayed him by revisiting its younger register a couple of times at the end, but he’d gotten it all out.

“...just remembered you walking back in Jonathan’s house and grabbing a bat to fight a monster,” she laughed, but it sounded warm. “Good, um, good for you.”

“I guess,” he sighed, feeling his lungs start to shudder. “Fuck. Hopper’s—I don’t know what Hopper’s gonna do. I don’t know what Mrs. Byers is gonna do—”

“I’ll work on Eleven first,” she sounded determined.

“Eleven’s fine!” His voice was still all over the place, which made everything sound kinda hilarious, and he stifled a snicker. “Eleven’s here. Eleven knows.”

“Why am I not invited?” Her giggle sounded as nervously squeaky as his did, which was reassuring. “I like pancakes too, y’know!”

“We’ll—next time. Next—I hope there’s no next time,” he choked out a laugh, wiping his face.

“...we’ll make *sure* it’s okay, Steve,” she said, her voice still shaky, but it was her eyes-narrowed, steady-hand-on-the-trigger-finger voice, and he leaned his face in his hand for a long second, gaining determination in the memory of her unloading bullets into a monster.

When he walked back in the IHOP, Billy had turned sideways to stretch his legs over the whole seat, and Steve grabbed his boots, sliding underneath. As ever, when anybody grabbed Billy but didn't kiss him or shove him into a wall, he glared. Steve patted his knee. "Anyone order me anything?"

"I'll order you waffles." Eleven opened the menu again. Steve shrugged.

"You could play Atari on a date," Will suggested, and Billy let his head fall back to stare at the ceiling.

"Ooo, Atari date," Steve nodded, resisting the giggles that had crept up on him talking to Nancy, "—strip Frogger."

"What the fuck is wrong with you." Billy smacked his arm, as Will blinked. Their server bounced on her toes at the edge of the table. "Hey, Steve! Is this your brother? And your sister? Oh. Uh, hey, Billy." She edged closer to Eleven's side of the table, as Billy grinned at her carnivorously.

"Hey, Heather." Steve nodded back. "Closing shift?"

"They asked me to cover." She leaned in to explain potato pancakes to Eleven—who did not look convinced—and carefully wrote down what sounded like a very complex order for waffles. Heather grinned over again. "Throw something at me if I fall asleep tomorrow morning, and I'll do the same for you." He gave her a thumbs-up, and Will held up his hand.

"Did you mean play Frogger with your *clothes off*?"

"He means do shit you don't wanna do if you lose," Billy punched Steve's shoulder, widening his eyes warningly. "Like lose your shirt. Or. Tell a secret?" He cocked his head at Steve, who grinned into his coffee.

"Truth or Dare."

Eleven was very curious about Truth or Dare, and Steve tuned out,

breathing the steam off his coffee, until he heard the words ‘bicycle’ and ‘dam’.

“Wait, what, ride your bike *where?*” Steve waved into the conversation, his attention caught from watching Billy try not to doze off over his waffles. It looked like everyone had let Eleven order, and *Billy Hargrove* listening to Will and Eleven, while frowning down at the pile of berries, berry syrups, and whipped cream, was making Steve’s heart feel like an expanding balloon of syrupy warmth.

“We didn’t *do* it,” Will shook his head, wide-eyed, “—Lucas told Dustin he’s the *man* of the house and he has to be responsible, he can’t *bike* into the *dam*.”

“Better talk to your boy Henderson, *pumpkin*.” Billy selected another strawberry, smile smug, and Steve bit back a snort of laughter, his eyes welling up with the strain of not falling sideways out of the booth in giggles.

He held his breath for a few seconds, then spoke in a slightly higher voice than usual. “I really should...*babe*,” he agreed, and Will grinned at them with pink chipmunk cheeks.

“Jesus, chew your food,” Billy snarled, and smacked Steve again. “Tell them to fucking swallow, what kinda dad are you.”

“Your favourite kind, honey, the kind that *swallows*, ” Steve sang back, and Billy’s mouth dropped open as his ears reddened.

His jaw worked until Steve caught his eye, and then Billy couldn’t hold his snickers either anymore. “So true,” he whispered back. “...*muffin*.”

Steve chewed thoughtfully. “You’re really more kinda honey-*mustard*, though.” He bumped his knee against Billy’s, and Billy huffed a laugh into his coffee.

“Papa told me how a man and a woman can make a baby,” Eleven announced, and Heather, approaching their table, did a wide-eyed swivel-turn back to the kitchen.

Steve felt the deep plunge from the wading pool of Babysitting into

the oceans of Parenthood. “Uh, um?” he wheezed, as his lungs apparently gave up for the night. Will threw his arms over his head with a squeak, his ears unobstructed.

“Yeah, and?” Billy asked, setting his jaw.

“He told me what sex is. A man and a woman.”

“Or a woman and a woman,” Billy’s smirk went sly, “—or a man and a man.”

“How?” She frowned, holding a particularly large strawberry in both hands and biting it like a squirrel.

“I-I don’t—” Steve wondered, in a blur, what adult he could even go to? He took a shaky breath. *Who you gonna call?* reverberated in his head. *Nobody*, he answered, staring into his coffee.

Billy glanced over, and his mouth quirked, which was honestly more worrying than anything else so far. “Well, there’s more to *sex* than *babies*—”

“Yeah, ‘cause Nancy’s not *pregnant*,” Will scoffed.

“Did you and *Nancy* have sex?” Eleven asked, wide-eyed, and Steve tried not to explode like a popped balloon with embarrassment, or combust with the influx of hot blood to his head in the middle of the (thankfully empty) restaurant. “*Why?*”

“Oh my god,” Steve groaned.

“I don’t want anybody else’s spit in my mouth,” Eleven informed Will, who wrinkled his nose, nodding.

Steve summoned a last reservoir of strength. “Well don’t do *anything ever* you don’t want to,” he mumbled, hands covering most of his face.

“Some people don’t like waffles,” Billy leaned back to sip his coffee.

“Nope,” she said, her eyes narrowed.

"Yup. You don't want to kiss anybody with spit, some people do," he shrugged, grinning, "—I'd rather kiss than eat waffles." Steve side-eyed him through his fingers, putting his fervent wish for a monster invasion on hold.

"You have to *eat*," Eleven huffed.

"Rather go *hands-on* than eat waffles, too," Billy frowned at the pile of sugary fruit and whipped cream, sipping his coffee.

"Hands on *what*?" Eleven squinted in concentration, and Will and Steve both jumped.

Billy's knee jostled Steve's as he started bouncing his heel. "Look, there are all different body parts, but I've got *some*—it's—it's just different—"

"Still good, though," Steve interrupted, sliding a hand over his thigh. "It's, uh, it's just as um, it's just as good."

"Have you *done* that?" Will whispered, lifting his head and staring at Steve, who stared dumbly back.

"All over." Billy whispered, grinning, and Steve groaned into his hands.

"All the parts work fine," Steve finally mumbled through his fingers, and Billy cracked up, choking on his coffee.

"So you," Will swallowed, "...kiss, and...things?"

Billy snorted, but Steve cut him off. "Of course I kiss him, we're *dating*, aren't we. It's great, I'd kiss him all day." Steve felt Billy go still next to him. He sighed, looking over to see Billy's neck as red as his own, bent over his waffles and coffee. ...*I'll kiss it later*, he decided, patting his hand over to slide his fingers between Billy's.

"So it's just the *same*." Will sounded half-offended, breathing out a huge gust of tension, and slumping back in the booth.

"...not everybody's Steve," Billy told his waffle, determinedly trying to cut it with his left hand as he squeezed Steve's with his right. "I

went for it with him—” He jerked his head sideways, and Eleven interrupted.

“What’s that mean?”

“He—” Steve squeezed Billy’s hand, pushing himself up in the wall of the booth to frown around for Heather, then dropped back to his seat. “He laid one on me, that night most of the Ghostbusters were over.” Eleven frowned at his privacy check, then firmed her mouth, and nodded, flicking her glance around the restaurant.

Will gasped, leaning back in, and Billy’s mouth quirked. “You weren’t *boyfriends* then?!”

“Yeah, don’t do it, I thought he was gonna cave my fucking head in,” Billy snorted. “Shoulda made sure first, somehow—”

“Asked, maybe,” Steve echoed his snort. “I hear that works.”

“Yanked me out of the snow and just *held* me there, and I k—I fucking kissed him—” Billy covered a grin, his face red. “I thought ‘Fuck, he’s gonna shove me back, he’s just gonna—he’s gonna hit me with that bat, and hit me, and hit me—” He wiped his eyes, and Steve scooted closer, watching Eleven, who glanced toward the kitchen, and nodded.

“You were *hugging* him.” Will stared at Steve.

“Well,” Steve cleared his throat, “—I wasn’t...sleeping so well, and you guys woke me up, and he wasn’t talking about monsters, he was just warm and pissed off—”

“Oh, usually he says I smell good, glad to know my other attraction is I’m *alive*, so I’m warmer than *snow*. Corpses are out, I guess. Don’t try to fuck Harrington if you’re a *zombie*, otherwise it’s a fucking go.” Billy tried to pull his hand back to grab his coffee, and flushed when Steve held on. He grabbed the mug with his left hand, hiding his face.

Steve leaned to bump his shoulder. “Nah, man, I was so fucking tired. I dunno if I’d have kissed you, but I was probably about to say something like a complete moron. I’d have said you were pretty for a

boy or something, you'd have *had* to kiss me to shut me up, or shoved *me* in the snow."

Billy's breath caught. "You think?"

It was hard to put words together under Will and Eleven's wide, unblinking eyes, but Steve did his best to ignore them. "You're awfully pretty, man. So yeah."

When Heather returned, warily edging toward their table—Steve could see her pale reflection in the window, head ducked to avoid children's sex questions, as Eleven made an X with her forearms, flicking her eyes between them—Billy was still coughing coffee back out of his lungs, wiping his eyes.

Heather refilled their mugs silently. Her eyes darted around like Eleven might ask her about childbirth or orgasms at any moment. She waved the coffee pot, and Steve registered the coffee had *all been caffeinated* too late, sighing at the mug in betrayal—and draining it—but he accepted a refill. As soon as Heather fled back to the kitchen, Billy squeezed his hand, swinging his legs off Steve's lap and nudging him out of the booth.

"Gotta hit the john." He stalked off.

After a minute of giggling between Eleven and Will, Steve slid out of the booth after him. His palms started sweating as he walked down the corridor to the bathrooms. The carpet was huge orange circles on blue and green, and he distracted himself counting them off as he walked. The sink was running in the men's bathroom. When the door opened, he pushed Billy back inside, slapping the slide lock closed as Billy flinched back.

"No, come here." Steve slid an arm around his waist to yank him close, hugging him before leaning back to lift him a few inches off the floor. He slowly spun, humming the sugar-pouring song Billy kept getting stuck in his head. Billy's legs swung out as he laughed breathlessly into Steve's neck.

"What the fuck."

“Jesus. *Honey*.” Steve snickered, rubbing his face in Billy’s curls. “Babe.” Billy was tense against him, but he’d slid his arms around Steve’s neck, kicking his feet up so his boots barely missed hitting the sink before Steve sat him back on his feet. “*Frosted cupcake*.” Steve leaned his head back to aim some kisses at Billy’s face.

“...I guess I did good?” he asked, laughing against Steve’s mouth.

“The *fucking best*,” Steve groaned, kissing whatever was closest—in this case, Billy’s jaw. Everything upwards of Billy’s neck seemed to be gaining heat, and Steve grinned against the smooth-shaven skin. “I’m just a *babysitter*, I don’t wanna have these conversations, you’re a fucking *hero* having my back, *thank you*, you asshole. Muffin. Sugar pie.”

Billy hung on tightly as Steve swung him around again, laughing. “Wanted to say any warm hole would do—”

Steve snorted, sitting him upright again, and pushing him up against the sink. “Thank you for not saying that,” he whispered back, licking softly into Billy’s mouth so he grinned, and his eyes half-shut contentedly, like a cat’s. He smelled like clean laundry and aftershave and tasted of berry syrup, and Steve’s dick was insistently telling him that jeans were restrictive, and Billy’s mouth was willing and soft. *So willing*, Steve groaned as Billy’s hands slid down the back of his jeans, pulling them even tighter over his crotch, and Billy laughed against his mouth.

“...not fucking you in the IHOP bathroom,” Steve whispered.

“You sure? You’re like rebar in there ,” Billy whispered back, yanking their pelvises together. Steve’s brain went white for a long second at the feel of Billy’s dick pressing back against him, but he jerked away.

“Not here, *jesus*. Fuck.”

“So you think I’m *pretty*,” Billy snorted, but he had his head ducked, glancing up through his lashes. “You think a lot of people are pretty?”

“Yeah,” Steve said distractedly, leaning against the opposite wall, and thinking of the least sexy things he could. *Tommy and Carol. Roadkill in hot weather. Diaper changing.* That did it. *When Nancy’s little sister had diarrhea.* He grimaced faintly as his dick shriveled like he’d shoved snow down there.

“Course you do.” Billy’d turned away, washing his hands again, hunch-shouldered.

“Oh, hey, no,” Steve went up and pushed the mullet aside to kiss up Billy’s neck under the curls, like he’d wanted to earlier. “Movie stars. Nancy. You.”

“Christ,” Billy whispered, grabbing the sink.

“Come on out when you’re done,” Steve breathed across the soft skin he’d left damp, and Billy shuddered. “Or I’ll eat your waffles.”

“Fuck you, christ,” Billy put his face in his hands as Steve slid out, checking the hallway.

Will and Eleven watched avidly as Steve walked back to the table, and he found his steps getting slower, imagining everything they might ask.

“Were you kissing Billy,” Will hissed breathlessly, and Steve flailed. “Yeah I *was*, not that you really need to *know*.”

“You look like you were,” Eleven’s eyes narrowed. “Your hair’s different, and your mouth is wet.”

Steve let his forehead thud against the table. “Can I just eat my waffle.”

“You should, or it’ll get soggy,” Will giggled, and Steve resisted the strong urge to stick his tongue out and blow a raspberry. He was making good headway on his pile of breakfast food when Billy arrived a while later, somewhat sweatier, and avoiding everyone’s eyes.

"They're guilting me for disrespecting my waffle," Steve said, sliding out of the booth so Billy could slide in.

"Sorry," Billy whispered, positioning himself right at the other end with nearly two feet between them, instead of comfortably an inch from Steve. Steve narrowed his eyes, but didn't press in front of their eagle-eyed observers.

Once they'd dropped Will and Eleven off—Mrs. Byers had met the car, already pelting questions, but Will drug her away—Steve squeezed Billy's fingers again. "You staying over?"

"Whatever you want," Billy unhooked his seatbelt, scooting closer to lean against him. "Wanna fuck?"

"Hell yeah." Steve stepped on the gas, and Billy laughed into his shoulder. "Where've you been, babe?"

"...damn car needs another jump," Billy sighed. "Have to get up in the middle of the night and start it, and he doesn't like me making noise."

"Shit. Call me, next time."

"Yeah?"

"I *told* you—" He bit his lips as Billy shifted away. "I mean. Yeah. I'll help." He pulled off to the side of the road. "Billy. Come here."

Billy leaned back in for a kiss, snickering. "Want a fuck before you dump me back off? He won't like you jumping it tonight."

"Nah, I'm kissing my boyfriend." Steve slid a hand under Billy's jacket, smoothing along his side. "Missed him."

"...you're hilarious," Billy snorted, but he sounded breathless. "Gonna climb in your lap and blow you if you don't fucking drive."

"That sounds kinda hard to manage," Steve told him, grinning, but backed off, checking the road before pulling back out.

When they got back to the house, Steve locked up, dropped his school stuff upstairs, and peeled out of his jeans and shirt. He flopped back against the bed, head on his folded arms, awaiting Billy's pounce, then finally wandered downstairs again and into the front room to find him curled in the corner of the couch, head lolled back, drooling into a pillow. Steve bit his lips on a wide grin, and grabbed a blanket. "...just gonna start talking real quiet now," he stepped closer to the couch, watching a frown flicker across Billy's face. "I think—I don't know, but I *think*," he dropped the blanket on the other end, "—Honeybunches Hargrove, if you can fall asleep that fast in my house, you probably won't lose your shit as long as I'm not sudden."

Billy hugged the pillow, turning his face into it, and Steve sat down on the other end of the couch.

"I'm gonna scoot closer," he narrated. "Get your boots off, okay?" He patted his hand along the couch before sliding it up Billy's boot to his laces. "Don't kick me. Bet you kick like a goddamn mule, dickhead." The laces were double-knotted, but he got them undone, and Billy only rolled over as he yanked the boots themselves off. "Aww." He leaned back against his end, throwing the blanket over them both. "I feel like a wild animal likes me." ...*dunno that I've really seen him sleep*, he tried to remember. *He looks cute, like a cat on its back swishing its tail like 'yeah, human, put your hand where I can bite.'*

He woke to Billy giggling, another oddity.

"Oh shit, I woke you up," he leaned his face against the back of the couch, grinning, as Steve blinked out of his blanket cave with suspicious eyes, "—go back to sleep. Keep talking."

"Whad I say." Steve glowered.

"You're not always trying to fight monsters," Billy's giggles returned, and Steve's eyes narrowed.

"Wha," he slid a foot out of his blanket cocoon and poked Billy's leg,

then registered Billy's lack of cocoon, "...cold?"

"Kinda." Billy leaned his head on his hand, grinning.

"Go to bed." Steve staggered to his feet, and grabbed him by the arm.

"You're buck fuck naked under there." Billy blinked, allowing himself to be drug towards the stairs.

"You passed out while I took my pants off," Steve snorted. "Whacking one off in the IHOP bathroom musta tired you out, ladies' man."

"...sorry," Billy muttered, "I know there were fucking kids, I'm sorry —" but Steve just drug him upstairs, and crawled in the bed, stretching to feel the sheets.

"Get in here." Billy did, and Steve pulled him close. "Go the fuck to sleep."

In the morning, they picked up Billy's car, and Billy's shoulders were up around his ears the whole while a man watched from the upstairs window.

Two days later, Steve woke to Max's voice on the phone. "Steve?"

"—Is this Max?" Steve dropped his awkwardly deep I-am-an-adult-please-don't-ask-for-the-man-of-the-house voice that had always made Nancy snort her Pepsi.

"You gotta come get Billy," Max said in a rush.

"What?"

"His car won't start. Something's wrong with it. I can get a ride from Lucas' mom, but the bus doesn't come way out here, Steve." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "If he has to get a ride from my

mom or his dad, or if he misses more school, he'll be in. Trouble."

"Shit, yeah, I can come get him," Steve glanced at the clock, "—I gotta go, then, you can tell Lucas I'm picking both of you up."

"*Don't bring Lucas,*" she hissed, and he blinked at the phone.

"No, I mean, you and Billy. I'll pick you and Billy up. If I say we're homework buddies, is his dad—"

"Shut up, Steve." She hung up.

When he pulled up at the Hargrove's, Billy's dad was standing in the open garage door with his arms crossed. Billy was in the road, pacing around Max and surrounding them both in a cloud of smoke. Max clambered right in, and Billy dropped next to Steve. "Go go go," he muttered, but his dad knocked on the window as Steve shifted into reverse, and Billy rolled it down.

"Thank you, son, for giving Billy a ride." The man smiled at Steve, holding out a hand. "Neil Hargrove."

Steve smiled back, keeping his hands on the steering wheel. "I sure wouldn't want to be late, sir, we better go." He channeled his inner unfulfilled boy scout, and Max snorted.

"You see that?" The man leaned in, and Billy pressed back in the seat, staring straight ahead. "That is what *respect* looks like. You're very lucky to know such a nice young man." He just leaned there, face inches from Billy's, smiling. "...did you say *thank you*, son?"

"He sure did." Steve held the brake on, tempted to just gun it and let the window shove Mr. Hargrove's elbow so his fist clonked him in the head, but pretty certain it wouldn't help.

"Yes sir I did," Billy repeated woodenly, and Steve suppressed the further urge to grab his hand and squeeze it.

"We really should get going," Steve repeated.

"I bet this nice young man pulls his own *weight* around the house," Mr. Hargrove stepped back, releasing them, and Billy fumbled with

another cigarette as Steve sped away.

“Hey, not in the car,” Steve caught his hands, squeezing them, “—what a fucking asshole. What was that all about?”

Max stuck her head between the seats. “He won’t pay to fix Billy’s car.”

“Trying to get a job,” Billy tucked the cigarette behind his ear, twining his fingers with Steve’s and squeezing hard. “I can’t work if I can’t—leave the house—I can’t fucking *get* there.”

“And he can’t pay for car repairs if he can’t work,” Max called up, and Steve glanced in the rearview mirror to see her sneakers on the ceiling of the car.

“Get your feet off the fucking roof,” Billy hissed, glancing at Steve, but he shrugged, and Max’s feet stayed on the ceiling.

“To do what?” Steve could feel his fingers going numb in Billy’s grip, but he reached over to use his left hand to turn down the defrost rather than let go.

“What I did before.” Billy shrugged, letting his head fall back, eyes closed.

“...he did deliveries,” Max put in. “He got these crazy tips. From *housewives*.”

“Shut your hole.” Billy’s cheeks were flushing, and Steve raised his eyebrows.

“Huh. I was kinda torn between wanting to reverse the car, gun it, and just—thump-thump, no more Neil—”

Billy turned wide red-rimmed eyes on him, then let his head roll toward the window, but Steve could still see the edge of a grin.

“Or, like, I was so afraid he was gonna ask me how we knew each other,” Steve felt his cheeks heat as he turned onto the main road, “—‘Oh, basketball, sir, you know, he gives me tips on ball-handling’, I mean, what.” Billy made a choked noise, loosening the death-grip

on his fingers, and curling toward him. “‘It’s hard going, but we have lots of stamina, sir, we can go all day.’ I could not think of *anything* to say that wasn’t—y’know, everything sounded dirty.”

“Grosssss,” Max groaned from the back. “Thought you guys met at a party. Like fucking—staring across a crowded room.”

Steve barked a laugh. “That doesn’t sound *better*. Billy at the ball in his Fairy Godmother bare chest.”

“No,” she shuddered aloud. “Eugh. He sweats for that himself, it’s nasty.”

“I’m not fucking—*Cinderella*, stick to the basketball.” Billy cleared his throat. His face didn’t change, but his neck and ears were turning red.

“Yeah, okay,” Steve couldn’t stop grinning at the idea of Billy Hargrove in gleaming glass slippers and gleaming pectorals at the ball, “—how about ‘we’ve been really working on two-player teamwork, really giving it lots of hands-on practice,’ or maybe ‘We play shirts and skins—we’re always both skins though, it gets confusing.’”

Max punched both their seats, but she was laughing—as was Billy, wiping his eyes.

“Teaching you to handle a stick shift.” He grinned over.

“‘He’s such a *good grappler*.’” Steve said in reverent tones.

Billy smirked at him. “Handling some more horsepower.”

Steve snorted, coughing, and Max yelled, “You two are *so disgusting*, Nancy Wheeler isn’t a *horse*.” After a short pause, she smacked Steve’s seat again. “You’re gonna do *homework* together. On alllll the furniture, *all night long*.”

“Oh my god,” Steve wheezed, pulling in front of the middle school and dropping his head to the wheel. Max climbed out and sauntered to where Lucas was waiting, and Dustin waved, running up, but Steve mouthed ‘later’.

“Hey,” he threw his arm around Billy’s seat, frowning behind them so he didn’t have to scrape any children off his rear bumper. “Across a crowded room?”

“Shut the fuck up.” Billy stared ahead. “That’s not what I said.”

“...hey. We’ll figure your car out. And I can give you rides.” From the wary glance Billy gave him, he’d overshot ‘gratitude-inducing’ and dipped into ‘suspicious behavior’, and he sighed. “You probably just need a new battery.”

“Faster it’s fixed, faster you won’t have to give a fuck.” Billy smiled sweetly, and Steve pulled his arm back, setting his jaw, and drove. “You wanting me to pay you back?” Billy leaned the seat back, propping his boots on the dash. “How much cock is a battery worth, your majesty?”

“Go lick one,” Steve muttered, uncertain which he meant, and pulled up at the school. Billy’d slammed the door and lost himself in the crowd before Steve wrangled his backpack from the backseat, and he groaned into the steering wheel. Max had kicked his bag nearly under his seat, and once he wrassled it free, he surfaced to see Nancy peering through the windshield.

At his groan, she cringed. “Honeymoon over? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” He climbed out. “His dad’s a shitheel and he’s being a shitheel.”

“...sounds like that follows.” She fell in step with him. “Wait, Billy, or his dad?”

“Both of them! He keeps...” he touched his hair, making sure it hadn’t deflated over one ear, “—I dunno, he thinks I’m gonna, like, start punching him, or something. He thinks I’ve got some—like an *evil plan*.” He grinned over, and she bit her lips together.

“I think—” she cocked her head, eyes narrowing as he held the door for her, “—how *much* of a shitheel is his dad? He actually...hits him?”

“Yeah. It’s a lot of little stuff,” he grimaced, “—I mean, it’s hard to

make it sound—like, he calls the cops on him all the time. Winds him up when he's drunk and tells him to drive into a tree. I guess he scared him with a nail gun?"

Nancy's shoulders straightened. "A *nail gun*."

"Yeah, like, shoved him against the wall and fired next to him. Max said they both know he wouldn't do it, but—"

"A *nail gun*," Nancy repeated, jaw firming.

"...yeah. I told him he could just crash at my place, but he doesn't believe that either. I think he's just...y'know, he's real tired of being scared, so he's pissed off all the time."

"Who wouldn't be." She let her heels clack louder than usual, and he felt a burst of fondness for her fury on *Billy Hargrove's* behalf.

"He's still an asshole," he shrugged, "I mean, that's a given."

"Well, yeah." She was craning her neck, surveying the crowds, and he sighed, frowning around for Jonathan Byers. "I don't want to invite him for Christmas dinner, Steve, but we have to do *something*."

He felt himself grinning like a complete goon. "Yeah, I know—oh, Jonathan's over there. Talking to Mr. Mundy."

She stood on her toes, squinting, then blinked, and laughed. "...thanks, Steve."

"Yeah." He caught Jonathan's look of alarm between the two of them, and blew him a kiss, waiting just long enough to see him look revolted before turning on his heel to head for class.

As ever, Billy lingered in the showers, his shoulder brushing Steve's. Steve resisted a grin—it wasn't hard to spot the pattern, now that he knew what Billy'd been getting at, with his taunts, and his staring. *Meeting at a party, locking glances across a crowded room*, he felt himself grinning, and slapped lathered hands on his face to hide it.

What the hell did he say to Max?

"The fuck are you smirking about," Billy asked, most of his face in the spray.

"Your pig-tail pul—whoa," Steve tucked a wet curl behind Billy's ear to see the bruised fingermarks, "—he got you good. What'd he do, grab your face? D'you wanna come over tonight?"

"Shut up." Billy turned his back to the showerhead, facing Steve with his unmarked right cheek. "It's nothing."

"...want me to get rid of Tommy until you cover that back up?" Steve wiped suds off his face, glancing over to meet Billy's dark stare.

"What."

"Until you put your...whatever back on, your foundation? Whatever you're covering it with."

"Shut the fuck up," Billy retreated back under the showerhead, nearly shoving his face against it.

Steve shrugged, rinsing his hair, but caught Billy around the back of the neck when he came up for air—he froze—and pulled him in for a quick kiss. "It's fine, they've left," he let his eyes follow the water tracing Billy's pectorals. "...you know you look just as good with brown eyelashes."

Billy huffed a laugh and ducked his head, shoving Steve toward the door. When he came out, toweling his head, he sat down and fixed his face, glancing over as he pulled out a bottle of foundation, then a tube of mascara.

"You wanna come to my place tonight?" Steve sat next to him on the bench, facing him nearly nose-to-nose so he could watch the bruise vanish.

"Have you seriously never seen this stuff," Billy snorted, and Steve leaned in, bending to tuck Billy's hair aside and press a soft kiss to the nape of his neck.

“Nah, Nancy just uses mascara and lipstick—what,” he leaned back to see Billy’s face, but he’d turned away, gripping the bench with both hands.

“What the fuck,” Billy breathed.

“What?”

“You keep pulling this shit with me,” Billy elbowed him, before sighing, and lifting his mirror again, “...how the fuck did you know, anyway?”

“Know what?” Steve slid back to swing a leg over the bench, as Billy raised his eyebrows, pointing at his rapidly vanishing bruises. “We’ve showered together, dude, I can see it wash off. Besides, I look at your face a lot.” Steve snorted, grinning. “I’m not *blind*. I can smell it, too, just because your nose is full of smoke—”

“Tommy’s just an idiot?” Billy raised his eyebrows.

“Well, yeah,” Steve laid back on the bench, crossing his arms under his head, and making a face at the stains on the ceiling, “—*and* you don’t wash your face if he’s there. Like it’d matter. Just tell him all the rad dudes in Cali do it. Tell him it’s Kiss, but like...the *awesome California* version.”

“What.” Billy tucked his supplies in his jacket pocket, scooting to fold his arms across Steve’s knees and smirk down.

“You could have him in lipstick in a minute, dude.”

Billy was laughing against his knee. “Nobody wants that.”

“No,” Steve grinned back, “—but you have the power.”

Max was waiting out front of the school with Lucas, who lifted his chin at the sight of Billy, but stood his ground. Billy leaned over and honked the horn, opened his mouth, glanced at Steve, and shut it again. After another minute, when Max started kicking the ground, Billy slid out of the car, and Steve scrambled to follow.

Lucas took a step back, holding his hands up. “Look, she can just do it at our house.”

“What’s going on?” Steve put in, since Billy was just lighting a cigarette and looming.

“He stuck me in *Home-Ec*,” Max growled. “I *wanted* to take shop. I can’t make all this shit at home, it’ll make a big mess, he *hates* that.”

“She can just come to our house.” Lucas didn’t take his eyes off Billy, who finally weighed in.

“He doesn’t like her at your house either. Do it at Steve’s. Or lie,” he raised his eyebrows, “—and say you’re at—” he frowned at Steve. “Who, Eleven’s?”

“Why is *he* fine?” Lucas jerked his head at Steve, eyes narrowed.

“We could invite Eleven.” Steve grinned at her, and her face went sour.

“Stop trying to make us be friends just ‘cause we’re both *girls*.” She stomped to the car, and Lucas took another step away from Billy.

“...get Eleven to lie,” Billy glanced at Lucas, then focused on fixing his collar, “—when you want. I’ll cover.”

“What.” Lucas took another step back.

“You wanna see your little *girlfriend* or *not*,” Billy snarled at him, “—just fucking—have ‘Hopper’ call him, *lie*, fucking idiot—” Steve shoved him toward the car, and he stumbled, then stopped to straighten his jacket.

“Sorry,” Steve mouthed at Lucas, turning back to the car.

“Steve isn’t gonna have all this shit, *Billy*,” Max was muttering in the back. “A sifter. I’m real sure he’s got a *sifter*, Billy.”

“Shut up.” Billy rubbed his face, staring out the window.

“What do you need,” Steve turned to lean between the seats, “—we

can hit the store.” He ignored Billy’s disbelieving snort, and waved Max’ recipe away. “Just make a list, it’s fine, you’re feeding me.”

“I mean, *kinda*,” Max grunted, kicking Billy’s seat, and he jerked his head towards her, glanced at Steve, and rolled the window down again, leaning out.

“You look like a dog, asshole,” Max kicked his seat again, “—it’s *cold*, it’s fucking *January*—”

“I’ve got heat.” Steve cranked it. At the Bradley’s Big Buy, he climbed out and walked around to stand on the passenger side. “Go ahead and fill up a basket.” He pointed to the store, looking at Max, and she backed away slowly. Her eyes flicked between him and Billy, who’d let his head fall back against the seat again, but she stalked away. The muscles in Billy’s neck and jaw worked as he muttered under his breath.

“You okay, dude?”

Billy laughed, grinning at him. “Fuck you, I didn’t do anything.” He took a shaky breath, letting his head fall back again. “I didn’t do anything, just—fuck you, Harrington—” he jerked back as the door opened, and Steve dropped to a crouch, listening. “—I was being *nice*, if he’s too much of a fucking moron to see it—”

“Jesus, babe.” He reached out slowly and put his hand on Billy’s knee, and Billy stilled at the contact. “You’ve been edgy all day. I just wanted to say I can shop with Max, if you need to like...run around the building, or something. We’re almost to my house, you could meet us there, I could give you the ke—”

“Get out of my fucking face, Harrington,” Billy panted, hands clenched on the seat, and Steve scrambled back to let him edge by, “—I’m not—I don’t need a fucking *time-out*, asshole.” He set his shoulders, but kept his eyes on the ground, and Steve stuck his hands in his own pockets, suspecting Billy’d sink his teeth in whatever appendage got close enough, and then laugh through the bubbling blood.

Billy followed several feet behind as they shopped, occasionally

grabbing something Max read off the list and tossing it to her, but he backed away every time Steve's cart veered close, once into a display of tortilla chips with a loud enough crunch that he yelled "fuck", and the ambient noise of the store died out for several seconds.

Steve leaned against the cart handle, rubbing his face and trying not to laugh, or kick the cart, or grab Billy's shoulders and yell something unhelpful, like "CALM THE FUCK DOWN." Max' attention flicked between them the whole time.

"Hot chocolate stuff," Billy announced as they passed it. "You're low on marshmallows."

"I am?" Steve grinned over. "You been stealing my marshmallows?"

"I didn't *take* your fucking *marshmallows*." Billy threw a jar of marshmallow fluff at his head, and he caught it.

"You *count* your marshmallows, or what, just buy some more—" Max grabbed a handful of bags, shoving it at him, and pushing the cart between he and Billy.

"...I wasn't..." Steve ran his hand through his hair. *I wasn't angry*, he thought, slapping the bags into the cart, and clenching his jaw as both the Hargroves' shoulders hunched. "Fine, Jesus. What are we doing for dinner?" Max frowned up to see him glancing back at Billy, and he grimaced at the canned vegetables, trying not to let them see him wanting to yell *I'm not your dad*. "Right. Okay, we could get burgers. There's Italian, there's Mexican, anything sound good? We can go to a restaurant, sit down." To his bewilderment, Max visibly relaxed, but Billy turned and stalked away.

"I like Mexican," Max answered, after a moment's thought.

"Mexican it is," Steve sighed.

They both lingered, watchful and creepy, as he checked out, but at least grabbed a couple of bags. Out at the car, he popped the trunk, calling out, "Are you guys hungry yet? We could go now, and take some home, or go later—" and looked up at the sound of the door closing to see Billy holding out a bag, eyeing the inside of the trunk.

"I'm just kinda *worried*," Steve whispered to him, "—you're good, you're fine, you're just acting like—"

"Like what." Billy passed over the groceries, stepping back.

"...nothing." He slammed the trunk, sighing. "It'd be easier if you were a girl, I could just hug you right here—"

"Yeah, that's gonna get old real fucking fast, isn't it." Billy stalked back to slide into the car.

Dinner was excruciating. Billy waited for Max to slide in the booth first—she eyeballed him, but did it—and then Billy crooked a grin and slid in to face Steve. They both studied the menu like they were disarming mines, while Steve played with the straw in his coke, trying not to seem impatient. "Order the whole restaurant, I don't care." He waved to the server for more salsa. When he escaped to the bathroom to check his hair, and muffle a scream in his sleeves, he returned to find them whispering.

"So." Max shoved some chips in her face, as Billy flicked a knotted cherry stem out of his mouth with his tongue. She punched his shoulder. "Eugh. So. Billy *accidentally* hit the door."

Billy slammed his hand flat on the table. "Shut the fuck up," he hissed, eyes flicking to Steve.

"You were *right there*, though." She bared her teeth in a smile.

"I was right there, opening the door, but the *phone* kept ringing." Steve raised his eyebrows, wishing he could reach across to Billy, and—hold him still somehow, before he exploded.

"Shut the fuck up, Max." Billy didn't shout it, but it was loud enough that the people leaving a tip for their late lunch across the aisle paused. "We're fucking done."

"I just wanna know where Steve was." She smiled at the server returning with a massive pile of nachos Steve had mostly intended to hide behind. Max grabbed her napkin, turning the hot plate to get at

the shredded beef.

“Did anybody come up with a drink order...that I can actually fill?” The server—her nametag read Oceane, which was handy, as Steve remembered only her face—smiled at Billy, who smirked back, charm at full output, opening his mouth. “*Virgin* margarita?” she suggested, grinning, and Steve covered a snort, scooping up most of the guacamole.

“Hey...Steve Harrington.” She tucked her hair behind her ear, lowering her eyes, and Billy’s elbow hit his water glass. He caught it, but some spilled, and Max handed him her napkin.

“Maybe you don’t need any *anything*,” Oceane snorted at the mess, and Billy grinned at her, but his eyes kept flicking to Steve, and they’d gone half-lidded, like their first kiss in the snow, or the time at the Byers’ when he beat Steve unconscious.

Max elbowed him, shoving the nachos over. “*Billy*.”

“I’m not bringing you alcohol.” Oceane smiled.

Steve stifled a snort. “Uh, could I get another coke, though?”

“Sure. Lemme know when you’re having another party, Steve.”

Once she left, Billy climbed out of the booth, walked over to the table across the aisle where the people had left, and dumped his almost-full water glass on the floor under the table. He filled it with the dregs of their two beers and three margaritas, dropped back in their booth, and drank it down staring Steve dead in the eye.

“Jesus, you’re disgusting,” Max shuddered, and Billy slammed back out of the booth, spinning the empty glass across their table, and sauntering off backwards with a grin.

“Can’t take me anywhere, Steve,” he yelled, barking as he walked away. “Shoulda left me in the fucking car like a dog—panting against the window!” Thankfully, at barely five o’clock, the only judgemental face looking back at Steve’s was Oceane’s.

Billy was gone for a good while, and they finished the nachos. “So

this accident.” Max looked up, pushing the plate away.

Steve groaned, accepting another plate of cheese he’d apparently ordered. *At least I’ve got enchiladas.* He sighed.

She picked up a fork and bit it. “He said he made a *huge* fucking mess at your house. Bottles. Woke you up. You didn’t—” she slapped her own head, over her right ear, “—make him stop?”

“Look, he was drunk, he fell. I can’t—I don’t have *video*.”

“Just. If you tell him it’s an accident, he’ll say it’s an accident. So.” She leaned over and cut a big bite off his enchilada.

“Wait, what does that mean,” Steve sat his fork down, and rubbed his face. “*Tell him* it’s an accident?”

She smacked her hand on the table, shouting “—that’s what he *does*,” then covered her mouth, glancing around. “*Billy* doesn’t fucking know, he’s drunk off his ass. Neil always...” she trailed off, pulling his plate closer.

“Didn’t you two *order* anything?” he sighed. “Look, you don’t have to tell me this shit. He can come over. *You* can come over. If he’s too drunk to drive, just call me.”

She leaned her face against her fist, swallowing. “Fuck you, Steve,” she said hoarsely. “I don’t need *help*.”

Steve raised his eyebrows, cutting a bit from his end of the enchiladas. “Billy might.”

“Yeah, he fucking does, you think I *wanna* have this talk?” She jerked her hand between them. “Just don’t—don’t *fuck* with him.” Her mouth twitched, as she rubbed her eyes, then flailed again. “I mean, fuck him, I *guess*, if you really wanna touch *Billy*.” To Steve’s tired amusement, she appeared to be suppressing a gag, “—but don’t...fuck him up...worse, don’t tell him he’s *earned* it, don’t—don’t do that shit.”

Steve stared at her for a long second, then slid out of the booth. “I’m gonna make sure he’s okay.”

“You have fun with that,” she muttered, pulling his plate over to keep eating, and he rolled his eyes.

The bathroom door was locked, but he could hear pacing. “Hey,” he stage-whispered, knocking quietly.

“Shitfuck,” came Billy’s voice. “Yeah, I’m coming, fuck—”

“Just let me in,” Steve grimaced. *Great. He’ll think I’m here to slam his face in the mirror. Or get a blow job. Or both. And—*here he addressed his penis directly—*shut the fuck up, it’s not a hot idea. Shut up.*

The door unlatched, and Steve slid in, locking it again. Billy was sitting against the sink counter, holding a liquor bottle. “I stole it,” he snorted, smiling, and cracking his neck.

“If you were gonna steal a bottle of—” Steve cocked his head, “—Captain Morgan, what the hell was that with the—”

“I didn’t fucking know this’d be sitting out,” Billy looked him over, slowly, taking another swig. He screwed the cap back on, sliding the bottle into the sink, and grinned at Steve. “You here to show me how to behave in public? Gonna introduce me to your woman out there? Garbage, meet a real human girl.”

“Just making sure you’re okay,” Steve eyed Billy’s hands, casually flexing at his sides, and remembered them connecting with his face. “Did you order any food? Nothing’s showed up.”

“Thought maybe you came in here to feed me something else.” Billy didn’t step closer, but he slid his thumb over the fly of his pants.

“...maybe later.” Steve tried not to grimace, uncertain how to play...whatever this game was. “Want to just come out when you’re ready? I could order whatever you want.”

Billy laughed. “Sorry, watching you flirt wasn’t quite *enough* for me. Maybe I’ll just finish the bottle.”

"I mean," Steve leaned to see into the sink, "—that stuff's nasty. You *sure* that's what you want in your mouth."

"You said I can't have what I *want*," Billy picked up the bottle again, hefting it in his hand, and rolled his shoulders, "—might as well down it, right? You can take me home in the trunk." He stepped closer, unblinking. "Just shove me in there, lemme wake up screaming again. That was *fun*, wasn't it. Fun for the *whole family*."

"Dude." Steve leaned back against the door, crossing his arms. "That wasn't me. I'd have let you out at the Byers' when I found you, but you wanted to *murder* everyone. You were screaming shit about running Max over."

"Oh, yeah, of course I *would've*," Billy bared his teeth, "—fuck off and *die*, you fucking cunt." Steve opened his mouth, and Billy threw the bottle at the door. "I'm a *fucking murderer*, right, get the *fuck* out!"

The bottle hadn't broken, and Steve grabbed it, frowning down. He imagined leaving Billy for some poor restaurant employee to find. They'd probably call Hopper. "...you gonna make me tell Will Byers my boyfriend got arrested for screaming threats at the Mexican place?"

"Fuck," Billy took a step back, until his back thudded against the corner, "—you're calling the police. Of fucking course. Tell Hopper I got *loud*. Tell him it was *self-defense*, I threw the bottle first, christ—I didn't even—" he swallowed. "I'll shut up. I'll shut up, I'll behave, I'm good, I'll be good—Harrington—"

Steve sat the bottle down. "Yeah, you're good. You're okay. Hargrove." He took a few steps towards Billy, who jerked back, sniffing, and punched the wall.

"Billy, *stop*. I didn't call anybody. *Hargrove*. I didn't call. But they're *gonna*, if you keep screaming about murder in here. Don't! Don't punch the wall—"

Billy gave a pained grunt and punched the wall again.

"*Jesus*." Steve put a hand around Billy's elbow, and when that didn't

get a reaction, slid his arms around Billy's chest and arms, pulling him back against himself. "Did you break your hand?" His face tickled as Billy shook his head, and leaned against him, breathing shakily.

"Didn't even do anything," he whispered, "—I didn't—didn't fucking —"

"Yeah, great, you just punched a fucking wall and your hand's broken. Thanks for not hitting me, I guess." Steve set his jaw, heartily wishing he was eating enchiladas, instead of talking Billy down from being a—*a what*, he thought, sighing into the soft curls. *A fucking menace, fucking Billy the Menace.* "Jesus, I think you cracked the tile." He let go with his right hand to grab Billy's forearm and hold it up. "...your hand's swelling up, man."

"Just a fucking tile," Billy's breaths were coming faster, and Steve wanted to just...yell for an adult, mostly.

"You have no idea what the fuck you're gonna do, do you. What helps."

"What," Billy tried to jerk away, and his knees bent, so Steve scrambled to keep hold, and shuffled him onto the toilet as he tried to curl away, "—I didn't—Harrington. It's just a fucking tile, I didn't—look, fuck, I took the fucking bottle, but I didn't even—"

"Shut up." Steve grabbed his face, and Billy locked eyes with him. Billy's were spilling over. "God. Jesus. Look at that waterproof mascara, just doin' its job. Fuck. Billy." Billy nodded, his pulse pounding against Steve's hands. Steve swallowed. *He looks like his dad has him, the fucking asshole.* "Would it help if I kissed—" he didn't have time to finish the thought, as Billy's fingers clenched in his shirt and pulled him into a hard kiss that tasted like saltwater and Captain Morgan. "You taste like a pumpkin pie that's like a year old," Steve whispered against Billy's mouth, tasting him again, running his thumbs up Billy's cheeks to soothe him, "—fucking...rotten pie," he licked softly into Billy's mouth, feeling the pulse against his fingers start to slow.

"'Cause I'm rotten," Billy leaned into his hands. "Be grateful it

washed the beer-garita away.” He let Steve lift his chin, and kiss experimentally across his wet eyelashes. “...the fuck are you doing,” he laughed, sniffing.

“No idea,” Steve pulled the sleeve of his sweatshirt over his hands, and dabbed under Billy’s eyes, “—is it working?”

“Y-yeah,” Billy’s voice cracked, “—yeah, it’s working.”

“You good?”

Billy nodded, ducking his head. “Yeah.”

Steve kept a hand clenched in the arm of Billy’s jacket as they walked back out, dodging the low-hanging paper-mache parrots. Max was rubbing her stomach absently, and crunching more chips, the only thing left on the table. “...what the hell, did you guys *fight*?”

“Fought the wall,” Billy dropped heavily next to her, waggling his fingers, “—think it’s just bruised.”

Steve waved to Oceane—Billy rolled his eyes—and she wandered over to accept more orders—entrees and two hot chocolates. Steve looked up after asking about available whipped cream (it was) to see Billy’s dark-eyed frown.

“...what,” Steve sighed.

“You actually *like* hot chocolate, or is it...”

“Dustin says I’m a chocolate vampire,” Steve rolled his eyes. “I want to suck a straw. Look, you want me wandering around with a nailbat at four am, I’ll get coffee instead.”

“*That’s* a thing you fucking do?” Max threw her hands in the air, slumping sideways. Her voice continued from under the table. “You’re *perfect*, then, I thought you *weren’t a psycho*. Oh my god. Why. I hate both of you so fucking much. *So much*.”

“Have fun baking without me, then.” Billy raised his eyebrows, as

Oceane sat out more plates.

“You *bake*?” Steve dug in to his cheesy chilies, but kicked his feet up to clamp them around Billy’s calves. “Mmnum. Might have to *seduce* you.” He wagged his eyebrows, once Oceane had wandered off.

“You’re bad at footsie,” Billy grunted back, mid-bite, and Max groaned, immediately checking under the table, then sighing in relief.

When the hot chocolate arrived, Max drank both of them, and Billy narrowed his eyes at her, then at Steve. Steve just kept shoveling it in, until Billy’s warm *foot* pressed against his *fly*, and he nearly coughed up an entire coke.

When they got to Steve’s, the phone was ringing as he unlocked the door, and he groaned, but Max shoved him towards it. “Answer,” she growled at him. “Last time you weren’t answering Dustin kept *whining*.”

Billy unloaded groceries from the garage, as Steve allowed himself to be prodded towards the phone. “Harrington residence,” he told it.

“Is this the polite young man who picked up my son Billy this morning?”

Steve sat on the floor. “Yes I am,” he bit his lips, listening to Max and Billy bicker in whispers in the kitchen, “—uh, just a moment, uh. I have a...cat.” He pressed his hand tightly over the mouthpiece, scrambled to his feet, disentangled his feet from the cord, and leaned into the kitchen doorway. “Does your asshole dad know you’re here?”

“What?” Max paused, still pointing a wooden spoon at Billy. They both frowned over.

“He’s *on the phone*, do I—do I just pretend you’re not here, or—?”

“Don’t tell him we’re here,” Billy glanced at Max, “—call him and ask to stay at Eleven’s.”

“He’ll ask to talk to Hopper,” she raised her eyebrows.

The voice against Steve’s hand was getting buzzy in the small speaker. “Sorry, I’m back. Yeah.”

“I was hoping to speak to your father.”

“He’s out.” Steve rolled his eyes, wandering back towards the doorway, but he realized they were both following, so he dropped into a chair. “Did you need something?”

“You seem like a responsible boy,” Neil Hargrove began, and Steve made a face.

“I try to be,” he frowned very seriously, caught Max’s sneer, and couldn’t suppress a grin as he clasped a hand to his heart. “After all, sir, what happens in highschool affects the whole rest of your life.”

“Fucking hell.” Billy wandered back to the kitchen counter, and started assembling ingredients. He dropped the sugar, catching it against the counter with his hip, then knocked the measuring cup into the sink with a loud series of thuds. When he pulled the eggs out, he shoved them at Max, cranked the water on, and stuck his head under the faucet.

“That’s a very good outlook, son,” Neil sighed. “I’m guessing you don’t know Billy very well.”

Oh no, Steve thought, mustn’t say anything about ball-handling. Or stick shifts. “He gave me some tips to help my free throws,” he felt himself grimacing, “—I don’t mind giving him a lift.”

“Son,” Neil paused. “You sound like you’re going places. You’re a fine boy, and I’d just—” Neil sighed—for effect, Steve suspected. “I’d hate to see—it’s difficult, being a father.”

“Is it?” Steve’s eyebrows couldn’t raise any higher, he was pretty sure, but Max and Billy both kept glancing over, so he slowly spiraled his finger around his ear. Billy snorted.

“It’s difficult being a father, and knowing you’ve failed.” Steve waited, fairly certain hanging up would just cause more problems.

"Son, my Billy says he's changed. He's why we moved, and of course I—as a father—of course I strain to see some *good* in that boy, but I have to be honest with you. I don't think he's got it in him. His mother couldn't see it, and I'm beginning to think she was right. Nobody knows a child like its mother."

Steve wanted to groan, but he set his jaw. "Are you saying he...did something?"

Billy dropped the bowl he was holding against the counter, making a loud clatter. "S'not broken," he whispered over. "Nothing's broken, I'm sor—"

"It's really not, it's fine—" Max echoed, two sibilant voices echoing out of his kitchen, and Steve turned away, clearing his throat loudly.

"Sorry, cat got on the counter."

"Sounds like you need an animal that takes *discipline*. I prefer dogs," Neil grunted. "Well, as I say, he says he can change. But I'd hate to see a bright young man like yourself in a prison cell in ten years because you believed my Billy had the right of things. He's always been slow, my boy Billy, and that's—that's just not something a parent can do much about. Where I *do* feel I failed, son, is he's disrespectful, and he's dishonest—" he sighed again.

Steve got up and went in the other room, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"—It's downright cruel on a father, seeing fresh-faced kids every day, full of God's goodness, and knowing yours just...came out wrong, somehow. At first you think maybe he just isn't paying attention. Then you think, maybe he's too dumb to understand. I finally realized he was just rotten inside, black with it, clear through, and I still just can't help trying to teach my boy to be better. So—I don't want to bring you down, son, but I'm gonna have to tell you to stay well clear of Billy. It's for your own good."

Steve took the phone away from his ear for a second, staring at it, then cleared his throat. "I'll think about what you've said, Mr. Hargrove. I better go now, I have to—" he looked up to see Billy

watching him, arms crossed. “—uh, I have to, cook a ham. Dinner. Night!” He hung up.

“Long conversation,” Billy’s voice was hoarse. “Harrington—”

“Shit,” came Max’s voice muttering in the kitchen, and Billy turned on his heel and went back in there.

“Shit,” Steve echoed. “What the hell. What the fucking...” he pushed himself to his feet, at least twice as tired as he’d been before, and sat down in the kitchen again. “What do we say about Max? Should I just take you back tonight and you can say you were at a friend’s and forgot to call?”

“Okay...” She bit her lips together, frowning between he and Billy again. Billy was kneading the dough—like it was his dad’s face, smacking it on the counter, then squeezing it between his knuckles. Steve’s fingers itched to join in, maybe wallop it a few times with a rolling pin for good measure, but Billy glanced up at Max.

“Who’s getting this extra credit here, me or you?”

“Meeee,” Max sighed, stomping over, and accepted the rest of the dough. Once Billy’d gotten her slamming it around in the correct way, they put it on pans.

“Gotta let it rise,” Billy muttered, soaping his arms up to the elbows to get the specks of dough off.

“I like making bread,” Max lifted a corner of the damp dishtowel to peer at it. “It’s violent.”

“Be a couple hours,” Billy told the sink.

“Wanna watch a movie?” Steve grabbed a towel, wrapping Billy’s forearms and scrubbing them dry. “Max, you wanna pick a movie, and I’ll make hot chocolate?” She grinned like a cartoon shark and ran out to the front room, and Billy groaned.

“Not Godfather!” he shouted after her, and she laughed like a supervillain.

“...not sure whether I have The Godfather.” Steve cocked his head.

“Rejected,” Max stuck her head back in, “—you’re rejected. But I want more hot chocolate. Neil had a date with my mom and made this huge deal about it being family, he and *Billy* being *family* now, and he told me to pick the movie, and Mom *knew* what I’d pick—”

“Sure wasn’t Cinderella,” Billy snorted.

“Neil told me to pick my *real* favorite, that he’s my *daddy* now, and I should take being his daughter *seriously*, and be *respectful*, and then *Mom* says ‘She loves the part with the horse head in the bed and all the blood everywhere’ and Neil shut the hell up for *almost five minutes*. ”

Billy snorted, shaking his head. His hands were trembling.

“Yeah, pick a movie,” Steve called, and her footsteps clomped away again. He laced his fingers with Billy’s cold wet ones, tugging him close, and Billy made a soft noise in his throat as he leaned in to the kiss.

“What’d he say,” Billy whispered as soon as Steve pulled back. “You fucking know I’m garbage already.”

“Jesus, shut up,” Steve leaned in for another kiss, bracing himself for the awful Captain Morgan flavor, but Billy turned his face away, “—you’re a person, Hargrove, c’mon, you sound like I’m sucking face with coffee grounds and banana peels.”

“What’d he say,” Billy’s fingers dug into Steve’s biceps, but when Steve didn’t start unloading Neil Hargrove’s stream of insults, Billy deflated, leaning his head against Steve’s shoulder. “...lemme blow you after Max leaves, make up for earlier,” he whispered against Steve’s neck. “*Harrington*. Let me, c’mon.”

Steve’s throat was suddenly dry. “Like I’m gonna say no,” he muttered back, squirming in his jeans against Billy’s warm weight. “We’re supposed to be making hot chocolate.” He slid his hand up to cup the back of Billy’s head, twining his fingers in sweaty curls. “Doesn’t matter what he said. Hey,” he ran his thumb down Billy’s

jaw, “—I’m not gonna listen to him.”

“Just let me fucking apologize,” Billy kissed back hard, pushing him against the cupboard. “Lemme suck your dick until you don’t care what I’m like.”

“Unlikely to happen,” Steve snorted, pulling away to fill a pan with water, and Billy stood very still.

“No apologies, just get it right the first fucking time, and don’t keep *fucking up*,” he whispered, laughing, and Steve glanced over.

It was hard to tell whether Billy meant to be thinking his mumbling to himself. “Good plan?” Steve ventured.

Billy sat down in a chair, his breaths coming faster, and rubbed his face. Steve dropped his wooden spoon and came to squeeze his shoulder. “Babe. Honeybunch. Gummy bear. What—”

“Anything you fucking want,” Billy laughed, not looking quite at him. “Just—just tell me the—the plan. I know I can’t—a fucking apology doesn’t let me just—I can’t just—”

“Billy—” Steve pulled the other chair over.

Billy flinched at Max’s yelled “Get out here! I picked *Alien*.”

“Oh fuck no,” Billy called over his shoulder. “Steve’ll go batshit.” The water on the stove boiled, and Steve jumped to stir it. Billy wandered into the front room, dropping into what Steve now thought of as his corner of the couch.

“Yeah, uh, Steve *asked me to pick*.” She crawled over to the laser disc player, and Steve came out with mugs for Billy and Max and flopped facing the back of the couch, curling his face into Billy’s t-shirt.

“S’fine, I’ll just listen to it,” Steve mumbled into Billy’s stomach, and Max bounced on the end of the couch, growling.

“Steve, I swear to god, if you’re giving him a blow job right here and now I’m calling the *fucking police*,” she hissed, and Billy cackled, sliding his fingers into Steve’s hair.

“Not,” Steve rolled to look at her, “—I can bite his stomach if you want, though. You know he’s ticklish?”

“Noooo...” Her grin widened, and Billy shook his head.

“Sure, you try that, if you don’t need all ten fingers,” he told her. His fingers tightened in Steve’s hair, and Steve winced, raising a hand to disentangle them. “Maybe you’ll get to meet Sleepy Steve.”

“What?” Max wrinkled her nose, and Steve raised an eyebrow.

Billy shrugged, allowing his fingers to be drawn free of the tangle they were in, but sliding them back more gently.

“Sleepy Steve?” he asked.

“The one that thinks I’m worth saving from monsters,” Billy snorted, “—Sleepy Steve’s too dumb to notice.”

“Notice what,” Steve pressed, but then Max turned the lights off, the room lit up blue, and Steve hid his face in Billy’s stomach.

When he awoke, Billy was stroking his hair and the edge of his ear, staring out the windows, his eyes reflecting blue. Max was cheering—loudly—for Ripley, and Steve didn’t move, watching Billy’s red-rimmed eyes, and his jaw working, and feeling his calloused fingers. When it was over, Max trotted in to the kitchen and started banging around, and Billy just slumped, letting his head loll back. “What’re you gonna do to me, Steve Harrington,” he asked under his breath, and Steve kissed his stomach, prompting a yelp.

“Nothing?” He sat up. “I wouldn’t do anything you didn’t make me do.”

Billy swallowed, nodding, and squirmed away to walk back in the kitchen.

Steve leaned his head in the kitchen. “Are we watching something else?”

“Why does bread take so damn long,” Max growled.

"...you picked the recipe," Billy said, after a pause where he just watched Steve coming into the kitchen, and stepped back into the counter.

"Stay as late as you like." Steve shrugged, heartily wishing Neil Hargrove would get sucked up in a tornado, instead of spreading his poison around when he wasn't even there.

Billy waited until Max was carefully arranging dough to drop the metal bowl behind her, and she swore, swinging around with a punch, but he blocked her with the bag of flour, smirking—until the bag blew out. They both ended up covered in white powder, and probably white faced underneath, watching Steve. He dropped into a chair, raising his eyebrows. "You two look like really happy cokeheads. I'm not coming over there."

"We've got the good drugs," Billy snorted. His hands were shaking again, and Steve tried to look cheerful and serene.

"That was like a third of the flour, asshole," Max sighed, leaning over the sink to try and brush it off her hair.

"Yeah, how's Steve gonna know you're not a fuckup if you can't make perfect bread." Billy looked between Steve and the sink, cheeks reddening, and ran his fingers through his hair, distractedly dumping most of the flour down his shirt. "Fucking hell," he muttered, ducking his head, "I'm gonna need a shampoo."

Max snorted. "I just want to *pass my class*," she said angrily, in the general direction of the measuring cup. Steve stayed out of the way, sticking by the fridge to let them have the stove side of the kitchen, stirring more hot chocolate mix, and heard scrabbling. He looked over his shoulder to see Billy swig from the bottle of tequila, and slide it back behind the microwave, before inspecting his hands with a sigh.

When Billy pulled the second pan out of the oven, Max was standing directly behind him, and he stumbled, swinging it away to avoid her—swiping Steve's hand with the 400 degree metal. Steve swore,

jerking back, and stalked to the sink. "Sorry I'm—I'm not drunk," Billy whispered, feeling Max pull the pan from his hands. "Fuck, I burned you, fuck. I was steady myself, I'm not drunk, Harrington. Shit. I know you won't—" he laughed, "—doesn't fucking matter, does it. Doesn't matter." Billy slid his lighter out of his pocket, and grabbed the cigarette tucked behind his ear, and Steve waved. "Oi."

"I dunno, King Steve," Billy lit up, cupping his hands around the cigarette like there was a wind through the kitchen. He had to flick the lighter so many times Steve thought it might be out of fluid. "Your Majesty. You gonna teach me to *listen right*? It never works." He sauntered closer, shoved Steve aside, and stood behind Max, who was prodding the twice-risen dough. "What're you waiting for? In the fucking bathroom stall you said 'later', Harrington, it's later *now*. What fucking lesson you gonna pound into me? Put up or fucking shut up."

"What the fuck," Steve frowned over, holding his hand under the cold water.

"Not letting me apologize, I know what that means, I'm not that fucking dumb," Billy smirked, "—just do it. Just *do it*, Harrington." He grinned, walking into Steve so his weight pushed him back against the sink. "Whacha gonna do, Harrington? What—are you gonna—do." He blew cigarette smoke in Steve's face, and Steve rolled his eyes, turning away. Billy shoved his shoulder, then again. "Do it, Harrington. Go on."

"Fuck is wrong with you," Steve muttered, and Billy took a shaky breath.

Max glanced back, then at the dough, and Billy caught Steve's eye. "What the fuck are you gonna do," he whispered, lowering his cigarette near the freckled skin between her hair and collar. Steve grabbed his wrist, yanking him away and slamming him against the oven, as Billy laughed in his face.

"What the fuck!" Max yelled, dragging at Steve's arm, but he was busy yanking the cigarette from Billy's hand and tossing it in the sink, the adrenaline carrying him through dragging Billy out of the kitchen,

shoving him bodily through the door to the garage, and locking it behind him.

"...what happened." Max swallowed.

"Sorry." Steve leaned back against the door, rubbing his face. His heart was pounding with the cold clear energy he got fighting monsters, in the snow, and he felt himself giggling.

"What'd you do, why's he so quiet in there," her voice rose, "—Steve, what the fuck's going on."

"I don't—" he swallowed, "—shit, it's not heated in there." He yanked the door open on Billy squinting into the rectangle of light, leaning against his car, and felt along the wall to turn on the garage light. He peeled his sweatshirt off, tossing it at Billy Hargrove's head. It hit him in the face, since he made no effort to catch it, and rolled to the floor.

"Okay, we're done," Steve counted on his fingers, still feeling like he was peering at them from more than an arm-length away. His vision was slowly closing in on Billy, the outer edges going dark. "Two, you—you're a *person*, so you can still stay here so your dad doesn't fucking...beat you to death, because I guess that's bad." He counted off a third finger. "But. I'm going to close an account at the bank. It'll take some paperwork, but I'll get it rolling. Take the money, and then nobody in this fucking town has to see you ever again for the rest of our happier fucking lives."

As he shut the door and locked it, Billy was sliding down the side of the car to sit on the floor.

Notes for the Chapter:

IT GETS BETTER, Y'ALL! I realized I could either wind Billy up until Steve realizes Billy's brain is misfiring, and make him worry about that as much as being mad--OR I could have it be less dramatic, but Steve wouldn't get it, and they'd either drift apart or it'd be a long slow process of them being mad at each other and...I wanted it done sooner. Believe me,

this is actually rewritten from something WORSE!

But sorry! It gets better! I want them to be happy too! XD

THANKS SO MUCH TO IHNI FOR ARTS AUUUUGH
<3 <3 <3 <3!!!!

Thank you so much for wandering in! Lemme know if you liked my story--I lovelovelove hearing from people! Kudos! Short comments! Long comments! Questions! Constructive criticism! Comments as extra kudos! Thanks so, so much! XD

(I try to reply to each one, but if you don't want a response to your comment then please say "No reply please" or "Whisper" so I'll know not to reply.)

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6. Before mapping borders with the princess, the prince must rescue her from her tower

Summary for the Chapter:

Steve just wants Billy *entirely safe*, so he can yell at him properly.

The outline hasn't changed, but all the scenes keep being longer than I anticipate, so...nine chapters? Ten? I DO NOT KNOW. It'll depend on how long-winded I am.

Steve stumbled back from the door to the garage, waved aside the general shape of Max, and grabbed the doorknob to the bathroom. The door didn't quite latch behind him, but he rattled around with the hook clasp until it caught, and sank down against the wall. *If the room is gonna to whirl so much around me*, he thought, *maybe I shoulda staggered closer to the toilet*.

On the other hand, sitting with his back to the bathroom door put him about four feet from the door to the *garage*, where over and around the sounds of his own pounding heart he could hear Max hissing at Billy through the door. It was a nice reminder that although he had brought someone into his house who *threatened a child to make a point*, she was okay. Billy hadn't actually burned her neck. *Billy Hargrove*, he groaned into his arms, *the person I was using to tell myself no kids were in danger*. *He didn't actually hurt a kid to fuck with me, he just made it clear he...might*.

"That's all." He yanked his shirt over his head, wiping the sweat off his face with it, and let himself slump to his side against the door. The painted wood felt cool and good against his shoulder. "That's all he did. How could I have known, right, the dude that almost beat my face in. He beat some of his *own stupid* into my face," he mumbled, listening to Max pounding on the door to the garage. *Glad she doesn't have a cigarette burn on her neck now*, he huffed a laugh. *Hope she doesn't have cigarette burns anywhere else*.

His hands shook, and he clenched them together, trying to breathe

slowly. It felt like *somebody* should yell at him, and he couldn't even bring himself to think about what Nancy would say, so he started the task himself. "I-I know she's *afraid* of him," he leaned his head back against the wall, his vision blurring. "*I know* she's afraid of him. And I *fucking* brought him in here. He *attacked* Lucas, he tried to *hurt* Max, he's a—he's a fucking grenade. He's a *land mine* that I brought in my house."

This is why she's too smart for me. Nancy. She probably saw this bullshit coming a mile away. "My bullshit," he snorted, feeling his lungs seize, and braced himself between the door and wall, as it felt like it was spinning away from him. "Because I'm bullshit, she's right, I'm *bullshit*."

His breath wheezed through his teeth, and he muffled the noise with his sleeves. "Fuck, Billy, what the *fuck*." He let his head thud back against the wall, and resisted the urge to do a *Billy*, and thump it a few more times. *Sure isn't helping his head any.* He concentrated on the burning pain in his lungs, and eyes, and tried to breathe. Billy still hadn't responded to Max—he could hear her banging get louder, the rhythm a little slower than the blood pounding in his ears. "Shit," he mumbled into his sleeves. "Shit. Shit. *Bullshit*. Bull *fucking* bullshit *bastard* fuckhead *shitface*."

He leaned there for a long time, letting his brain haze out. For once he welcomed the way his vision swayed, and particles fell from the ceiling, and imaginary blue mist rose from the floor. He could smell the earth of the tunnels again, and the metallic mud where blood had soaked in the ground.

It felt like hours later when Steve staggered to his feet, blew his nose, and stomped out to lean against the counter. He grabbed a plate, and thumped one of Nancy's nasty vanilla candles in the middle of it. The plastic wrap was loud in the silent kitchen. Max was sitting at the kitchen table writing out columns of math, her left hand clenched around her skateboard, and her foot tapping at the ground. She glanced up, but kept her head lowered. "That candle smells like *shit* clear over *here*," she said hoarsely.

“At least it doesn’t smell like the Upside-Down.” He leaned back, folding his arms, and she barked with laughter.

He couldn’t tell whether she was laughing or crying with her hand over her face, but her voice when she finally said “Light it, then,” was thick-sounding and wet. His nose was full of the smell of baked bread, but lighting the candle at least gave him something to *do*, before he had to go talk to Billy Hargrove.

He reached over and rattled around in the drawer of flashlights, clothespins, rubber bands, and, apparently, easter egg colors, and found the matches. “Want me to take you home?”

At that, she shoved back from the table and stomped in a circle around the kitchen, drawing shaky breaths, and wiping her eyes and nose on her sleeves, before dropping back in her seat. “I, uh. I let Billy out.” Her voice was husky. “He’s home by now.”

Steve clonked the plate down on the table. “Shit. *Damn* it. He went *home*?”

“Yeah, he fucking went home!” She shoved the table at him, and he grunted as the leg of it slammed into his knee. “You left me in here! You—” she said, smacking her hands on the table, “—you *grabbed* him and *threw* him and fucking locked him in there! We thought you were calling Neil, until you—” she waved a hand, “—stumbled off to the bathroom like a goddamn drunk. The hell is going *on*, asshole!?”

“I have no *fucking* clue.” He winced, rubbing his knee, and took a shaky breath. His lungs seemed to have showed up for their shift, so that was something, anyway. “He just—he came over to make *bread* and he—he’s out of his *goddamn mind*, I don’t—I don’t even care, come on, we gotta go get him back.”

“What the fuck do you mean, get him back?!” She followed him to the hook where he hung his keys. “Don’t give me that crap, what the hell were you fighting about?! You—you didn’t get *that mad* at him lighting up in your house. You—if you’re gonna fucking—if you’re taking your bat, I’ll walk.” She bit her lips together, and her grip tightened on the edge of her skateboard where her hand had been resting. “I don’t wanna watch you get your —*revenge*, or whatever,

come on, Steve, nobody got hurt.”

“Fuck,” he whispered, watching her set jaw, and red eyes. He swallowed, “...no, that’s—it doesn’t ma—I mean, come on. We can yell in the *car*, Max, I’m not trying to—I’m not bringing—” he waved his empty hands, “—I’ll be mad at him when he’s not around his *dad*, I can’t be mad at him if he might be getting his *face* broken.”

“I’ll—I’ll come, I *guess*,” she grabbed a paper towel and blew her nose, “—if—if you’re not gonna—do anything. Like that. But tell me what he fucking *did*.”

“He, uh. He was screwing with me. He was...threatening you.”

“What.” She kicked the table again. “What?! What in the *hell*. Damn it. Fucking. *Fuckhead*. What the fuck. So what, he—” her homework crumpled as she shoved it in her bag, then shoved her books in on top.

Steve rubbed his face, groaning. “I’d *told* him he couldn’t—if he was—if *we* were—” he pulled his coat on, waving around, then at himself, “—just leave my goddamn *kids* alone, fucking christ. Just leave ‘em the fuck alone.”

“That didn’t even make sense.” she accepted a Ziploc for her bread, breathing slowly, and wiped her eyes. “What, that was your deal, he could stay here and do—” she waved a hand, wrinkling her nose, “—*whatever*, and he wasn’t supposed to *hurt* us, and he managed to fuck that up? The fuck, Billy.”

“How the hell do I know,” Steve ran his fingers through his hair. “He was—he was fucked up all *day*, but usually like. If he wants to fight he just—” he waved a hand, “—he just *does*. I thought he was doing better, I’m so goddamn—” He took a breath as shaky as hers. “I’m so fucking sorry, Max. Shit. I—I didn’t mean—”

“Shut up. Shut the hell up, Steve, we’re mad at *Billy*.”

“Yeah, but I brought him *home*. To my *house*, where a bunch of fucking *middle-schoolers* come to feel *safe*.”

“Yeah, that’s probably why he wanted to be here,” she sidled closer,

punching his shoulder, “—you and your hot chocolate and blankets. You did a fucking nice thing and the asshole shit on it. That’s what he fucking does. He’s a fucking *piece of shit*, everyone *knows* this.”

Steve nodded, blowing out the candle. “...jesus, that reeks.” He opened the door to the garage for her, glancing around to see what kinda of wreckage he had to clean up. It looked suspiciously tidy.

“Candle smells as shitty as Billy,” she growled, and he snickered.

“Sometimes he’s worse.”

“Because he’s *shitty*.” She waited for him to open the car door, nearly crushing the bread in her grip before he tapped her hand to remind her.

“...yeah.” Steve sighed. “Yeah, he really is.”

As he drove Max home, and listened to her saying *she* was fine, it didn’t make any difference to *her*, he tried to think. He opened his mouth, bit his lip, and sighed. “I don’t know whether to tell anyone.”

“What.” She looked over.

“I mean, what if Neil’s actually gonna kill him. He needs someplace to go, and. I mean, nobody trusts him anyway—”

“You’re still gonna—what? Pull the hell over, Steve, what’s—you just wanna yell at him, or—”

He did, leaning his head against the steering wheel.

“He threatens me *all the goddamn time*, so—” her fingers on the bread pan were turning white, “—Steve. Did he *hit* you in the bathroom?”

“No! No! He hit the wall. He flipped out and punched the wall.”

She let her head fall back against the seat, closing her eyes. “Something, anyway.”

“Shit. I just want him—I don’t want him *here*, but like—I don’t *want him*, want him—”

She groaned. “Christ, leave me out of it, if you’re gonna have, like, make-up sex, I don’t wanna know—”

“No! No. I don’t want—I just don’t—I don’t wanna say the wrong thing and make him *worse*—”

“You can’t fucking make him *worse*, you fucking *moron*,” she hissed, punching his leg. “—you saying you don’t want me to say anything to anyone? You want *me* to keep a *secret* so *Billy* doesn’t get butthurt that *everybody knows* he’s exactly like he damn well *is*.”

“Noooo,” Steve groaned into his arms.

“Fine. I won’t tell anybody.” She swallowed. “Take me the fuck home, asshole.”

“I’m not saying—*Max*. Just—go ahead and tell people he’s a *shithead*. Just maybe don’t...tell them he was doing it *at me*? I don’t want, like, Dustin or Nancy trying to—”

“Ohhhh,” her eyes widened, “—christ. Yeah. They’d fucking. Dustin would *die*. You could just have Nancy shoot him in the dick, though. Nobody’d think it was *her* fault.”

“I don’t want him to get *shot*.”

Max was cackling. “Fight of the exes! Fight! Fight!”

“I’m taking you the fuck home.” He pulled back onto the street, his lungs feeling a little less weighted. “Thanks, Max.”

“...what’s one more secret,” she grunted.

“Sorry,” he sighed. “You can come over too, y’know. Bring Lucas. Watch a movie, I’ll—I’ll haul Billy upstairs to do homework.”

“Gross. ...you offering some kinda big brother trade-in?” She punched him again, in the apparently universal incomprehensible Hargrove language of knuckles. “Same number of years on you.”

“Less mileage, maybe. Ow.”

“You’re so weird—ew, wait, am I *Dustin’s* sister now?”

“Yeah.” He smirked over. “Welcome to the family.”

“Ew, then is Billy *your* brother then? Gross, Steve.”

“Oh no, you’re right!” he clapped his hands to his face, then grabbed the wheel again. “The babies we won’t have will have three heads!”

She cackled. “Make Billy carry them around. Like a possum.”

“He’d probably drop them.”

“Oh no, your dickbabies!” she echoed, snickering. “I am gonna hurl, shit. Three heads. Too much fucking *screaming*.” It wasn’t even funny, really, but as he pulled close to their block, slowing in trepidation, they were both smiling. “Steve, wait,” Max smacked his arm, “—stop. Let me out here.”

He pulled over again, frowning over. “We gonna walk in the snow?”

“He’s already seen your car a couple times and talked to you on the phone, let’s get out here, or he’ll want to *talk*—what’d he say on the phone, anyway? You sounded like a *robot*.”

Steve sighed, gripping the steering wheel. “Probably the usual bullshit. Billy’s worthless and if I talk to him I’ll end up in jail. Did he like...get *arrested* or something? In California? Why’d you have to leave?”

“Well he’s *Billy*.” She snorted. “So *probably*. Neil hates California, though,” she put on a growly voice, “—‘Everyone there only wants money and sex!’ ‘Hawkins, Indiana is a traditional *American* town full of *hard working people*.’ I guess Billy was going out a lot, like, getting phone calls? Neil never lets people talk to him here, hardly. I don’t know.” She kicked the floor mat.

“...he’s not allowed to use the phone?”

“I mean, he can *use* it, but Neil always wants to know who he’s

talking to, and he'll grab it away from Billy and talk to them, and if somebody calls for Billy he usually tells them not to call again and hangs up."

Steve felt his fury rising again, and blew out a slow breath. "How the hell is he supposed to get a job, then."

"Who'd *want* him." She opened her door, and he opened his, stepping out into the snow with a deep breath.

"Yeah, but you don't know anything he actually did? He didn't have a parole officer, or anything?"

"Mostly he just acts like an asshole all the time," she rolled her eyes, "—he's not the *mafia*, Steve. So. What are we doing. You're gonna call him out?"

"...not sure if I want your dad to notice."

"He won't care, he doesn't want him having friends anyway, go ahead and scream your head off."

"No, I'm—I'm not—" Steve stared at her, "—I don't wanna *fight* him. I just want him to come *back*."

"Okaaaaay," she was squinting at him, "—*why*, though? I mean, you could get him alone *later*. Like, at *school*?"

"Your dad might actually *fight* him," he hissed, flailing. "You saw what he was like tonight!"

"No." She frowned, biting her lips. "They don't *fight*, really, I mean he just kinda dishes out, and Billy takes it—"

"Jesus god fucking bastard." He spun around, tromping towards their house, and nearly slid off the sidewalk on a patch of ice. "Send him outside when you get back."

"...he's not gonna listen to *me*, what—"

"How do I get him out here." Steve stopped, facing her.

"You *locked* him in the *garage*," she had her eyes narrowed, "—tell me what the fuck is going on, or I'm not helping."

"Do you *seriously think* I'm more dangerous than his *dad*," Steve flailed, "—I just pushed him in the garage, I didn't hurt him!"

"*You're* mad at him! Neil won't even notice him at this time of night! He'll go to school tomorrow! It doesn't *fucking matter*—what'd he even *do*—"

"He f—he almost burned your goddamn neck off." He pinched the bridge of his nose, swallowing. "I—I got him *away* from you, and the—then I had to go—breathe. For—just—help me get him. Out of there."

"Jesus, Steve, breathe," she squeezed his elbow, eyes wide. "Damn, Steve. Go *home*. Don't just shake your head, go—he's *fine*, he's been okay for *years*—"

"He's *not okay*," Steve rubbed his face, taking deep breaths, "—he's an alcoholic asshole bag of *shit*, but I am *taking him home*. Help me. How am I—doing that."

"Go around and bang on his window." She set her shoulders. "I'll keep everybody talking in the kitchen. Get him to climb out. Just—tell him you'll tell on him if he doesn't," she shrugged, "—he'll come."

"...I don't want to tell him that." Steve grimaced.

As they walked closer, Max lifted her head like a bird dog, and then Steve heard it—he wasn't familiar with the guitar riff, but it definitely sounded like Billy's music. "Well, that'll make it so *he* can't hear you, but I dunno how Billy's gonna hear you either." Steve nodded, and she shoved him onward. "Go get him. Blessings, I guess, I sure don't want him *back*. No returns."

"Yeah," he nodded, "—oh. Max, you got a ride in the morning?"

"...I can just walk, there's not *that* much snow. But—I'll call, if—anything." He nodded, and she took a deep breath. "Uh, Steve. Thanks. For getting so mad. For me. And." She stopped there,

glaring at her bread, and he reached over to do a gentle push at her shoulder with his fist.

“Weak,” she snorted, and turned towards the front door, juggling her pack, skateboard, and bread through the snow.

Steve crunched around the back of the house, feeling a bit like he was on patrol, and watching for shadows in the darkness. The sides of the Hargrove house were somewhat lit by the neighbors, but he followed the music around to the back, and there was the forest. Even knowing nothing had *happened*, Steve took a deep breath of relief when he saw Billy’s window set in the hill, a bit higher up off the ground—not that demodogs couldn’t climb a bit, but at least they couldn’t casually hiss against the glass. And after tonight, Billy wouldn’t be sleeping in there, and it wouldn’t matter. He hoped Max was the window set next to it, and not one of the ones around the front, where anything could just smash in, no effort required. *I hope if something does, it eats Neil Hargrove.*

Behind the snowy windowsill, the light in Billy’s room was glistening off his muscles as he lifted weights, and Steve stared for a long second, licking his lips. The song was blasting about somebody who was only seventeen. Steve braced himself.

He ran scared, he reminded himself, jogging in place, and blowing on his fingers. *Sorry, Nancy, Hopper. Finally get rid of the asshole that tried to murder me with fists, and here am trying to talk him back in.* He hadn’t considered his idiocy murder tally in a while, and he tried not to. *His dad wants him to die.* He blew through his cheeks. *I’m here because his dad wants him to die.*

At least ten on the deserving-of-a-mercy-killing-by-smart-people tally today, he figured, giving himself three for staying in the restaurant bathroom after Billy chucked a bottle at his head, two for not calling Hopper when he had Billy locked safely in the garage, and a generous five for driving over and standing under his window, planning to convince him to come back and wreck more of his house.

When Steve tossed a snowball at his window, a dumbbell crashed to

the floor. He cringed, but tossed another one, and Billy came to the window. He was yelling something over his shoulder, but he looked freshly showered and un-made-up. He squinted out the window, and Steve grabbed another handful of snow, throwing it while it was still mostly fluff, so it sprinkled the window more than thumping it. Billy stood, frowning down, long enough that Steve bent and hucked another snowball.

When the snow fell away from the glass, Billy was gone. The music got quieter, and he came back and lifted the sash, leaning awkwardly under the wood with his back bent. “Hey, King Steve.” He folded his arms on the sill. His cigarette hand was shaking.

“God. Are you okay? Climb out and come back,” Steve stage-whispered up.

“The fuck would I do that?” Billy glanced over his shoulder, taking a long drag on his cigarette. “You said we’re done.” His eyes were red, and his hands shook, and Steve wondered if he was still cold from his trek through the snow, after Max had thought *Steve* was more of a danger than their *dad*.

“Yeah, done *fucking*,” Steve hissed up. “I’m not sucking face with somebody that’d hurt a *kid*, *jesus*, you *fuckhead*.”

“I didn’t.” Billy rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, what if she’d stepped back, asshole. Get your ass back in my house so I can be mad at you.”

“The hell does that mean?” Billy crouched, rubbing his arms.

“I can’t fucking be mad at you if I’m afraid he’s gonna—hit you with something!” Steve beckoned, flailing. “Come the fuck on. Come back and drink hot chocolate and we’ll—we’ll figure this out, come on.”

“—figure what out.” Billy leaned further out, shirtless and shivering. His cigarette fell, and he told either it or Steve to fuck themselves, and dug out a new one.

“Christ, put a shirt on, it’s freezing. Throw me a bag, man, pack

some clothes, come *on*.”

“...you want me to come back with you *why*?” Billy hugged his arms, leaning his chin on the windowsill, and looked about twelve years old. Steve wondered if his dad had hit him then, too.

“I can’t be mad at you until I know you’re *safe*,” he blew on his hands, “—you’re not *safe* here—”

“You’re the one who’s pissed off,” Billy snorted, “—marched me out of that bathroom like there was a firing squad.”

“...after we made out for like ten minutes.” Steve frowned up, then around. “I wasn’t that mad.” *Was I even mad? He’s like a natural disaster, I don’t even think to get mad, I’m just counting the sandbags and bottled water. I’m not even—* “God, you’re exhausting. You guys should have a garden chair or something out here.”

“...it’d be covered in snow,” Billy hissed back, leaning further out. “If you’re cold, go home, idiot.”

“I’m the idiot? Get a blanket or something, asshole, there’s snow on the ground, if you didn’t notice. Your arms are *in the snow*.”

“There’s some stranger in my yard trying to get me to *run away with him*.” Billy leaned away, then came back, pulling on a sweatshirt. He brushed the snow off the windowsill.

“*You should definitely go with the stranger*,” Steve called up, wishing Neil Hargrove was away, so he could actually yell. Or climb in, and drag the idiot out the door. “*The stranger has candy, and he’s getting really fucking cold—*”

Billy glanced over his shoulder, smacking his hand over a laugh at Steve’s shivery growl.

“Come on, Hargrove. It’s the goddamn balcony scene, what are you waiting for, like a song, or a swordfight—” He spread his arms, feeling like he was challenging the other boy to a duel.

“Yeah, why is the most popular boy in school under *my* window,” Billy rested his chin on his arms, “—you bring your bat?”

“No! No, swear to god, Hargrove, I’m not trying to—to trick you, or—I just—”

“Fuck off, Harrington, I’m not *that* fucking—*impaired*. I’m not coming down.”

Steve took a slow breath, rubbing his face. “It’s not a joke, to you, about the bat. Is it.”

Billy laughed, looking away. “It’s hilarious, the fuck do you mean. Nice guy Steve Harrington and his blood-soaked nailbat. Sounds like a kid’s book.”

Shit, he seriously thinks— “Kinda does,” Steve stomped his feet, face screwed up in thought, “—something Mike’s mom would read. ‘I will not hit you with the bat. I do not care where you are at,’” he smirked up, but paused, frowning at his hands. “Uh, ‘Do drugs, drunk drive, do this, do that, I *will not hit you with that bat.*’ ”

Billy stared at him for a long second, before making a noise that sounded like he might be starting to cry, but turned into cackling giggles. “That was so bad, christ, no wonder Nancy dumped your ass.”

“I know, right?” Steve wrinkled his nose, and blew into his hands. “Your dad is such a fucking asshole. Chill out, Hargrove, I’m not a *serial killer*. What if I leave it at Dustin’s house? Or Mrs. William’s.”

“...what?” Billy wiped his nose, frowning.

“You were scared of *me* all day.” Steve squinted toward the front of the house, trying to figure out how they got from Billy beating his skull in on the Byers’ floor to Billy flinching into the grocery store salsa display.

“Shut up, you were fucking *pissed off* all day,” Billy’s snickering had turned wet again, “—the hell did I even do, thought you were gonna slam my head in the fucking car door. I hadn’t even been a goddamn disgrace in the restaurant yet.”

“Jesus *fuck*, Hargrove,” Steve whispered.

“Didn’t know you’d be so pissed Max called. I coulda *walked in*, jesu
—”

“Wait, what?” Steve bounced on his toes, rubbing his arms. “I wasn’t mad, that was fine. I’m trying to get your ass in my car right *now*, dude, I like it way better in there than—”

“You said you wanted to *run my dad over*,” Billy blew a smoke ring. “Fucking...wrong side of the bed this morning?”

“No.” Steve blinked up. “He was being an asshole. I wouldn’t actually *run someone over*, not unless he was like...shooting at people.”

“Like you didn’t hit anything with the bat,” Billy sighed, leaning his forehead on his arms, then waved the cigarette, “—what’s the blood from, your *royal majesty*?”

“It wasn’t a *person*.” Steve almost rolled his eyes, then remembered Billy’s urgent whispers in the kitchen, asking to apologize, the way he kept insisting Steve had let his head fall against the bolt of his door, and Max’s shaky voice on the phone saying “*I think he, uh. I—I think he slammed him into a few other things*,” she’d said. “*The tub makes a noise*.” Steve rubbed his face. *We showed him the bloody nail bat as a bluff, and here I am, expecting him to know that.* “Okay, yeah, I gotta tell you, or you won’t know, right. Something got out of the Hawkins Lab—”

“Yeah, you said that,” Billy leaned out further, almost close enough for Steve to jump and grab his arm, yanking his legs into the sill, his body upside-down through the window, dumping him in a tangle of limbs in the snow.

He elected not to grab for him. *Billy’s got enough head trauma.* “It wasn’t—they’re fucking hard to describe, the Scooby Squad calls them, uh, ‘demodogs’. Billy mouthed it, head warily cocked. “Like these—blue Chuck Norrises—but their heads open like fucking *banana peels with teeth*—”

“What,” Billy cocked his head, squinting.

"They did!" Steve heard how loud his own voice got and bit his lips, and they both listened for a long second. He dropped back to a stage whisper. "I knew you wouldn't believe me—"

"I believe you believe it," Billy took a long drag on his cigarette, eyes narrowed, "—what'd the drugs do?"

"Drugs? I didn't—"

"The shit you shot me up with. That help you see blue monsters?"

"That—that was a—that made you *sleep*, dipshit, I didn't have any of that. Anyway, they were just wandering around, tunneling—"

"*Tunneling*." Billy raised his eyebrows.

"All these goddamn tunnels, man, it was like huge—evil—maneating—gophers—"

"Oh my god," Billy snorted into his arms, "—gophers, what the hell."

"Yeah, okay, I'm not fucking—*word wizard* Billy Hargrove, shut up." Billy's head jerked up, cocked. "*Anyway*, they killed Nancy's friend—Barbara Holland—and, oh, some hunters, Mrs. Williams' dogs, Bob Newby—he ran the Radio Shack—"

Billy's mouth dropped open. "Holy fuck."

"Some police officers, some soldiers—" Steve resisted the urge to count on his fingers, watching Billy's frown deepen. "—some techs from the lab—oh, Dustin's cat—"

"...we'd have heard about it." Billy sat back further inside, but kept his eyes fixed on Steve's.

"Well, I mean, everybody did, they just weren't real specific about what happened. Exactly."

Billy leaned away to rummage around, returning with another cigarette. "*Exactly?*"

"Yeah, they said something leaked into the ground, a chemical leak.

An *asphyxiant*. Lots of closed-casket funerals.”

“Some kinda hallucinogen,” Billy rolled his eyes, “—on lab specimens? Like...dogs? Or something? Apes? Something big.”

“This is why I didn’t wanna tell you,” a droplet of icy water rolled off the gutter and down the back of Steve’s ear, and his shivers turned into a full-body shudder, “—*fucking* hell.”

“—and in the middle of all this bullshit,” Billy paused to light up from his stub, “—you were at the *Byers* house, with a—with a fucking *bat*, and a bunch of kids, and—and ‘monsters’ everywhere?! Who the fuck are their parents? A *bat*? Doesn’t anyone in this shithole town have a *gun*?!” He stood, and stomped away from the window, then clomped back to flick the stub of his cigarette at Steve. Not being very aerodynamic, it missed by several feet. “A *fucking bat*, they gave you.”

“Don’t fall out the window,” Steve snorted. “Uh,” he bit his lips together, taking a deep breath, and considered how to explain Eleven. Billy raised his eyebrows.

“Gonna lie now?”

“No. No, just—they were all trying to get rid of—there’s just a *lot*, shit. They were luring them away from us.”

“Luring them,” Billy repeated, “—*where*?”

“Back to the lab. They had a way to kill them—”

“Better than a *baseball bat*.” Billy ran his fingers through his hair, sighing. “What the hell was the syringe about, then.”

“Oh...” Steve cringed. “That was for Will. He was really sick, like, hallucinating, he drew all those pictures everywhere.”

Billy rubbed the side of his neck. “You shot me up with some...*medicine*?”

“We doped you up with what we had to knock him out,” Steve accepted the blame for Max’s syringe-grab, “—saved my life,

probably, you shithead. Come on.”

“Probably thought I was King Kong that whole time.” Billy stared down at him. “What, that’s all I get?”

“I’ll answer all the questions you *want* when I’m not kinda afraid your *dad* will walk in and do—whatever you thought I was gonna do, christ. Come on, Hargrove,” he unclenched his hands to beckon, “I—I’m more horrified than mad, here.”

Billy raised an eyebrow, snorting. “...you drove over to get me back in your car ‘cause you’re *worried*.”

“Look, you’re—you’re a goddamn *human—person—being*, I can’t just leave you for him to—whatever, christ. I had to let you out of the trunk, I couldn’t let you drive away drunk, and I can’t let him—the hell did you think I was gonna do, anyway?”

“Like I know,” Billy huffed, leaning his head against the window frame. “Wouldn’t let me apologize. Thought I might as well get it out of you with Max there.”

“What.” Steve walked up to lean back against the side of the house, and closed his eyes, pressing his hand hard across them until he saw lights.

“You wouldn’t wanna scare Max,” Billy’s voice came from above, “—hardly gonna cave my skull in with Max there. You don’t wanna scare kids.”

“You thought I was mad this morning, so as soon as she was gone, you got out of the car and ran,” Steve said slowly, feeling like he was in one of those airplane safety videos, waiting for the oxygen mask to drop, only his was defective. *Maybe I’ll get sucked out of the plane.*

“Harrington. Shit,” there was a knock against the wall over his head, “—I had my fingers between her and the cigarette. She was fine, fuck, Steve, come on.” Steve looked up to see Billy’s hand flat against the siding, a couple inches above his head. He reached up and held his next to it, and Billy took a shaky breath. “...don’t just yank me out,” he said. “Break my fucking neck.”

"I won't." Steve waggled his fingers, and let his eyes fall shut again at the feeling of Billy's warm calluses against his nearly-frozen hands. He squeezed.

"Christ, you're gonna get hypothermia," Billy mumbled.

"Standing in the snow 'cause some stupid asshole took Stranger Danger to heart," Steve let his head fall against the siding, "—come back, okay?"

Billy yanked his hand away at the sound of a knock, and Steve smacked the side of the house, stepping away to see inside.

"Come on, come *on*," he hissed, and Billy frowned at him, glancing between him and the sound. The door creaked.

"What the hell, you didn't go? Jesus fuck," Max slammed the door again, and Billy yelled after her to get the hell out, then came to the window again, rubbing his face.

"So you...you fucking told Max you'd get me to leave."

"She knows I'm trying," Steve rubbed his arms, stomping his cold feet, "—she's supposed to be keeping them in the kitchen, but she probably thought one of us would give up by now."

"She's—she's a goddamn—I'm fucking allowed to live here too," Billy bared his teeth, "—he drug me here all the way from California. Until I can get a *job*, I have to *live* here, she can't—" he stomped away.

"...Hargrove. Come to my place," Steve whispered back. After a few seconds, he threw another snowball, and heard muttered swearing from inside. "Billy. You know you don't wanna be here, throw your school shit out. Pack some clothes."

"What, as a favor to *Max*? Get her dumbshit drunk brother..." He disappeared again, and Steve leaned under the window, whispering his name. After a long four minutes of silence, Billy stuck his head out again. "Fine. I'll—I'll disappear. Fine. Fucking—whatever, I'll go—I'll find a fucking way back to California. Just a goddamn minute."

“Hey, Max didn’t ask me to get you.” Steve waited, and caught the bookbag before it dumped over in the snow.

“Then it’s to fucking protect her, isn’t it,” Billy leaned his head out to snarl. He tossed his gym bag, and peeled out of his sweatshirt to toss it down too. “From the fucking—fucking *rabid dog*,” he laughed unevenly, lifting the sash further to swing a leg out the window. “Gonna take me out to the corn crib and shoot me in the head?”

“Jesus.” Steve grimaced up at Billy’s grin. “I’m taking you somewhere *safe* because you think worrying about that shit is *normal*. The fuck are you *doing*? Put a shirt on.” He shook out the sweatshirt, waiting for Billy to stop watching him and decide.

After grabbing a skinny little sleeveless t-shirt and yanking it over his head, Billy finally got his other leg out the window, tight jeans flexing over his ass as he lowered himself quietly from the sill and dropped. He smacked a hand into Steve as the snow gave way unevenly, then jerked back, crossing his arms. Steve drug his gaze up from the jeans to the naked shoulders and biceps, swallowed, and cleared his throat. The snow crunched under their sneakers, in a small cloud of panted breath. Billy stood in the snow, the reflected light from the streetlights gilding his hair and biceps, and Steve stepped in close.

“You look okay. Are you hurt—worse?”

“The fuck are you doing,” Billy allowed himself to be turned around, but his skin was rapidly reddening as Steve ran fingers along his side, then over his shoulder, looking for new bruises.

Steve reached up and tucked the soft curls back again, narrowing his eyes at the bruises he’d seen after gym, in the shower. He ran his thumb along the marks Neil’s fingers had left, and Billy licked his lips. “Did he hit you some more? Did anything happen? Shit, you’re bright red, come on, why didn’t you keep your *shirt* on,” Steve handed him the sweatshirt, and zipped it up when Billy left it open. “C’mon, man. You’re gonna freeze solid. Get warm.”

“Shut up,” Billy said hoarsely, and Steve handed over the gym bag.

"If you freeze solid, I will flip my shit again," Steve grabbed his hand again, tugging him along back to the car, "—I'll carry your icicle back and throw you in a hot tub and *then* yell at you, so help me god."

Billy snorted, but allowed himself to be drug along.

At the car, Steve had to let go of his hand, and Billy raised his eyebrows at the hesitation. "...seriously thought you might be dead, Hargrove." He squeezed Billy's hand tightly before letting go. "...you're such a *fuckhead* I want to keep track of you—get in the *car* before your dad brings his—*chainsaw*, or something." Once they tossed his shit in the back seat, and Steve had the heat cranked, he looked over again. "You look about the same," he set his jaw, "—you okay? He didn't do anything before I got here?"

"The fuck do you care?" Billy curled away from him, leaning his head against the window. "Talked to him long enough earlier. Tell him about Max, he'll fuck me up for you."

"...cared enough to come chase you down, you fucking...dickhead," Steve held his hand over the heating vents on Billy's side, and cranked them open, turning the heat on full, "—I can't—shit. I had to get your ass back and—I'm so—I'm so fucking sorry about. Everything. Shit." He took a long, shuddering breath, and he saw Billy's dark gaze fasten on him in the light of passing cars.

"What. What the hell are *you* sorry for."

"Sorry. You—you fucking *told* me. You kept saying you were gonna get beat, I *saw* you covered in glass from that cooking sherry—he fucking—he broke a *bottle* over your head?"

"The hell do you wanna hear," Billy hunched in his hoodie.

"I guess," Steve waited to turn his headlights on until he'd turned the car around, "—I just—there's a lot going on, with me, I didn't—you punch shit all the time, you punch me—"

"Look, you *win*, I'm fucking leaving already, what do you *want*." Billy rolled his head against the headrest, blinking rapidly at the ceiling.

“No! No, I’m just *saying*, Max is punchy! You—you fucking punch each other—I didn’t *get* it. I didn’t know he said that shit to you, he doesn’t let you use the *phone*—you’re really fine?”

“He lets me use the phone,” Billy muttered.

“Yeah?” Steve raised his eyebrows, and Billy looked away to watch the road, biting his lips.

When they pulled into Steve’s garage, Billy grabbed his stuff, swearing under his breath. The house smelled like gross bathroom candle and fresh bread. Billy frowned around, wrinkling his nose, and flinched back as Steve grabbed his hand again, leading him up to the other bedroom. The door opened on a king-size fourposter with a fluffy, flowered down comforter and matching walls, and Billy stopped in the doorway, dragging on Steve’s hand.

“I can’t sleep *here*.”

“Sure you can,” Steve let him go, threw open the empty closet, and yanked on a few drawers in the matching dressers, ignoring Billy’s quizzical glare, “—once we get your car fixed, you can bring your shit here until you get things figured out.” He pointed to the beige rotary phone. “It’s a different line, you can use that number for job stuff...I’ll need to remember to make a phone call.”

“Until you throw me out, you mean,” Billy snorted.

Steve scrabbled at his hair. “I’m—I’m still fucking pissed. You’re—you’re an asshole, you were *screaming at me in my kitchen* earlier, you —” he took a deep breath, “—all that—happened. But I’m kinda...more pissed off you thought you were gonna fucking *die*, you thought I was gonna *kill* you or something because—” he cocked his head, frowning. “I don’t even know, dude. He’s got you convinced nobody’s safe. But you can stay as long as you want.”

“Oh, sure.” Billy stepped closer to the bed, frowning around, and crossed his arms.

“No, I’m serious,” Steve flicked the latch at the top of the door, “—

look, it locks from in here. If you're freaked out about something, I can't get in. Nobody can get in."

"I mean, you could break the door," Billy pointed out, but he sat cautiously on the bed, listening. The comforter poofed up around him, smelling like flowers, and a bit like dust.

"Okay," Steve frowned around, "—you'd hear it, though. You could...lock yourself in the bathroom, or go out the window and drop down."

"...spend a lot of time planning escape routes from your house?" Billy raised his eyebrows, and Steve dropped next to him, huffing a laugh, and groaning into his hands.

"All the goddamn time, actually—oh." He waved down. "Mind if I sit down?"

"...nooo," Billy squinted at him, "—it's your—"

"Your room."

"Really not."

"Really is." Steve fell backwards across the bed with a *pwoof* of comforter, groaned, and reached over to prod at Billy's elbow.

Billy leaned back alongside him, turning on his side to prop his head up with his hand and watch Steve.

"Thanks for *adjusting your schedule*," Steve sighed. "I couldn't've slept knowing you were back there."

"You don't anyway." Billy shrugged.

"And I'd have gotten really cold yelling at your window all night. Sorry I wasn't really—paying attention," Steve frowned at the ceiling, then looked over, "—okay, you keep talking about rules and what I want. I *want* my shitheads to be safe."

"Yeah, I fucking get it," Billy growled, tugging at his earring.

"I'll tell 'em to leave me alone while you're here. I can hang out with 'em other places."

"What? I'm not a fucking—*junkyard dog*." Billy pushed himself up, glowering.

"I can't *trust* you, Hargrove," Steve rubbed his face, groaning, "—I've got no fucking clue what you'll do. *You* don't have any goddamn idea yourself! Shouldn't have tried the *first* time, holy shit, Steve, you fucking moron. Hopper said he didn't much like you around the kids, and of course dumb Steve Harrington here, no, sure, sir, I got this, he *listens* to me, what the fuck could go wrong—he just attacked Lucas because he was pissed off, obviously he kissed me so he's totally changed—"

Billy leaned his head back, looking away towards the door. "So all this handholding, it was just to get me in the car, you still think I'm—I'm a fucking—*danger zone*."

Steve reached over and ran his thumb over the clenched fist Billy was leaning on. "Sorry I...said some shit," Steve folded his arms over his face, "—I'm still fucking *pissed*, but I shouldn't have—made it sound like I—I give some shits," he snorted. "I do. Give tons and—just—tons of shit whether you're dead. Jesus."

"...you sweet-talking me, Harrington?" Instead of snickering, like Steve anticipated, Billy shifted closer. "You're shit at it."

"I knoooooow," Steve groaned, rolling to sprawl sideways across the bed. "I'm shit at a lot of things."

Billy shifted behind him, his breath warming Steve's ear. "Let me—lemme apologize, my liege lord. Come on. Your Majesty. King Steve."

"Yeah, that'd be fantastic, actually—" Steve's exhausted mutter turned into a "What the *jesus*, Hargrove—" as Billy spooned up behind him, sliding a hand around Steve's waist and unbuttoning his jeans. He elbowed back, scrambling away from Billy's tongue on his neck, and landed on his butt next to the bed. He tucked his chin back up over the edge of the mattress to glare, and Billy started

sniggering. “Who the *hell* have you been apologizing to?!”

“Doesn’t matter—”

“The hell it doesn’t. Use your *goddamn words*, asshole.”

“What do you want me to say?”

Steve glowered over the edge of the bed at him, suspecting sarcasm, but Billy was just waiting, plucking at the bedspread like his fingers wanted something to do. Steve groaned. “Fucking—fucking apologize for—the *kitchen*, you asshole—”

“I’m sorry I burned you.” Billy watched his face, and Steve blinked, remembering. In the mess over Max, he’d forgotten.

“Yeah, okay, you didn’t *mean* to,” Steve raised his eyebrows, “—right? It wasn’t some huge stupid plot to burn my knuckles off.”

Billy huffed a laugh. “Yeah, no. Didn’t mean to.”

“I don’t care, it was an accident, I’m not mad about that.” Billy bit his lips, nodding. “Say it sooner next time, and I’ll be like ‘no problem’. Well, go on.”

“Yeah,” Billy nodded again, “...gimme three tries. I’m in the slow class, y’know,” he laughed. “I’m sorry I tried to—to trick you, to control you, it’s your house, I don’t make the rules, I can’t—I can’t make you do anything—”

“What the fuck.” Steve glared up, resting his chin on the edge of the bed, and Billy swallowed. “*Max*, Hargrove.”

“I’m an irresponsible and disrespectful brother, and I’m sorry. I was rude all afternoon, Max deserves better,” Billy rattled off, then took a shaky breath, watching Steve’s face. “You *both* deserve someone better. I’ll be—I’ll try harder. I won’t fuck up, I’ll stop fucking up—you look like a goddamn prairie dog sitting down there. I’m still fucking up, aren’t I, shit, I’m a *fucking idiot*, Harrington, tell me what you wanna hear. Tell me what to say.” He crawled over to drop off the bed onto the floor, facing Steve, and crossed his legs. His eyes and eyelashes were wet, and his voice was getting hoarse again. The

vacuum-marks in the white carpet vanished, then returned as he ran his hands over them, breathing shakily, and Steve narrowed his eyes, reaching out to catch Billy's hands.

"...I meant the cigarette and Max's neck." He squeezed Billy's fingers.

"No," Billy shook his head at their hands, mouth quirked, "—you wouldn't get so pissed off you'd *want me to die* for something I didn't even do. If I'd *done* it, yeah," he glanced up, and his eyes widened. "Shit, no, that was it," he grinned, the water in his eyes shining, "—I'm—I'm so fucking dumb I don't *get* it, but I'm sorry—"

"Shit," Steve yanked a hand free, and held Billy's mouth shut with his thumb. "Shush, it's—shut up a minute, lemme think." Billy nodded, closing his eyes, and the tears he'd been holding back ran down his cheeks. Steve took a long breath. "You thought I was already pissed off," he tried, and Billy nodded against his hand. "You wanted me to just...get mad already, so it'd be over, with Max there so I wouldn't *kill you*."

Billy opened his mouth to run his tongue around Steve's thumb, and Steve ignored the heat in his cheeks. "Come on, get off the floor, back on the bed."

"You gonna let me apologize the other way now?" He pulled Steve up after him, crawling to lie in the middle. "My mouth knows what it's fucking *doing* with a cock in—"

"No, shut up." Steve sat next to him, taking his hand. "Okay. You haven't been—that Billy that beat my face in. That attacked Lucas. Lately."

"Fuck." Billy rolled his face against Steve's knee, and Steve felt an urge to punch his shoulder for interrupting, but decided it was absolutely not the time.

"Shut it, asshole. You—you've been somebody I kinda..." Billy was quiet, listening, and Steve slid his fingers into the soft curls, only to feel Billy's shoulders shaking. "Stop laughing—I kinda want you *around*. All the time."

“Fuck,” Billy muttered again.

“I saw you with Max and I just—I thought you—I let a fucking *monster* in my house, you were gonna *burn her*, acting like your fucking dad—I thought I was gonna puke up a lung—” Steve got all out in one breath, and closed his eyes.

“No, I didn’t even *scare* her, I did good with little Will Byers, right. And Eleven. It hasn’t—it hasn’t even been *two weeks*,” Billy rolled onto his back, frowning up, and wiped his eyes, “—I’m gonna fuck up,” he grinned again, tears leaking out of the corners of his eyes, “—*again*. You’re gonna wish I was dead.”

“Shit, no, fuckhead. You’re not, not—” Steve ran his thumb along Billy’s cheek, wiping the tears away, and leaned to smack a kiss on his forehead, “—you’re not gonna do that shit again. Not if you know I wanna protect you too, you stupid asshole. You don’t have to—get all—I don’t know, do *chess exercises* on me, I want you safe. If you start to get crazy, you can go for a run or something, or lock yourself in here, or—” he frowned around, ignoring Billy’s muffled giggles. “I don’t have any ideas. You’re smart, we can think of a plan. Keep Billy Hargrove feeling safe so he doesn’t burn the world down.” He shrugged, and Billy curled around him again, his laughter wet and panicky.

Later, once their breaths had evened, Steve frowned at the phone in his hand. He looked up and met Billy’s eyes, and blew his cheeks out, then leaned against the headboard and dialed. Billy leaned close, so the phone was pressed between their ears. Eleven answered.

“Hopper residence,” she growled, and Steve could hear Hopper shouting something in the background. He felt Billy swallow.

“Hey, El, it’s Steve, could I talk to your dad?”

“What the hell, Harrington,” Billy hissed, but shut up as she dropped the phone, or something. They winced in unison.

Over the clunking and feedback noises came her muffled yell, "I WON'T TELL YOU UNTIL YOU AGREE," and then scrabbly noises, and Hopper's voice.

"Yeah, yeah, you're right. You're right. Hello?"

"H-Hopper." Steve cleared his throat. Billy was rigid with tension against him. "Do—do you have a minute?"

"It's pretty late, is this Steve Harrington?" He sounded amused. "Yeah, kid, what's going on?"

"Uh." Steve slid an arm around Billy, squeezing him. He didn't relax. "If—can—can I tell you something, and you just—just believe me? I'm *sure*, it's not—I'm not being stupid, or—"

"Yeah, of course, kid, what's going on?" A scraping noise came through like he was pulling out a chair.

"Uh. Billy's dad. Billy and Max's dad, he's—I know he's told you—stuff—" Billy'd turned his face into Steve's shoulder, swallowing repeatedly.

"He's done that, yeah." Hopper waited.

"He's—" *What*, Steve tightened his hold on Billy, feeling hot skin where his sweatshirt had rucked up. *Evil? Hitler?* "It's—it's not true, what he's said. He's—he scares them with nail guns, he—" *Says mean things, he...makes them...act...bad?*

"Not gonna matter," Billy whispered, taking another shaky breath, but pressing his ear closer to the phone.

"*Nail guns?*" Hopper's voice had gone appropriately grim, and Steve took courage, and a deep breath.

"Yeah. He's—he's violent. He hits him—hits him in the *face* all the time. He broke a *bottle* over his head. Please don't—don't take him back there. He's staying here—if you—if you see him around, don't take him to his dad."

"Not gonna matter," Billy whispered again, his nails scraping Steve's

skin through his shirt as he tightened his grip.

Hopper could probably hear him, but he was quiet for a second. "...I will pass the word on." It felt like Billy's lungs seized—he made this high gulping sound, and Steve drew him in tighter. "Are they both okay? Do I need to send a car around?" Billy's face was in a wet spot against Steve's shoulder and neck, and Steve could feel him shuddering, even though he was nearly silent.

"Max is still home." Steve cringed at Hopper's soft "Shit." "I—I mean—he always—he focuses on Billy. I told her to call me if anything—I can pick her up, or bring her here, she says she's fine—"

"Did something happen today?" Hopper asked, his voice extremely even, and Steve flinched back from the phone.

"I—I realized some things," he ran his free hand up to tangle his fingers in Billy's hair, "—I hadn't—I didn't think, I didn't know how bad it was. I went and got Billy, I set him up here."

"Is that putting *you* at risk? Do you want me to come talk to him?"

Billy huffed a wet laugh, and Steve lifted the phone to lean their heads together. "I—I—no, I don't think so? We—get along, pretty much."

"He's gonna wanna talk to me." Billy swallowed, but didn't try to take the phone.

Hopper was quiet again. "I'll take your word for it. But if you need anything—"

"I'll let you know." Steve felt his own throat closing up at the sound of someone willing to come *save* him from his own stupid decisions, like the homicidal classmate currently most of the way into his lap. "Maybe—don't let his dad know he's here, I mean, he'll probably figure it out, but—"

"Yeah, kid." He muttered something vaguely obscene, and Steve grinned. "And you believe Max is okay?"

"I mean, for now? I don't—he's not—it's not *Billy's* fault his dad's

like that,” Steve growled, and Billy went still for a second, like he was holding his breath. “He’s fu—uh, he’s—he’s crazy, it’s not like if Max is perfect he’ll never do this shit to *her*. I think—I think it might take him a little while, though.”

“El, hon, come here,” Hopper called. “Okay, I need to get on this from my end. Anything else I can do?”

“Don’t think so,” Steve repeated the good night, and let the cord pull the handset off the bed, wrapping his arms around Billy. “Jesus, I can feel your heart pounding.”

“Can’t believe you came and talked me out of the window, you’re—you’re a goddamn lunatic.” Billy nuzzled against his neck, pulling away so his breath warmed Steve’s jaw. He smelled like *Billy*, his cologne mostly worn off but still faintly good, some kind of alcohol behind the cigarettes he’d been chaining in the window, warm and just a little sweaty. “The fuck did you do,” he laughed under his breath, ducking his head. “Fucking—how did—I had to call in a *fire*, to get cops to come. Never fucking believed me.”

Up close, and shining with water, Billy’s eyes looked like the glowing blue-green water in travel photos of Hawaii. Steve resisted the juvenile urge to lick under Billy’s wet eyelashes, half compelled to break the weirdly sincere eye contact, and half wary of his probable flinch.

Billy’s voice was soft, like he was telling a funny story. “They told me to stop making prank calls.” Billy’s eyes flicked to Steve’s mouth, then up to his eyes again, and he grinned, licking his lips and leaning in to nearly brush lips. Steve’s head thudded back against the headboard, but as he opened his mouth ask whether this was another apology, or whether Billy actually wanted to kiss him, or if it was something *new* and horrible, like payment for room and board, Billy shoved away.

“*Shit*. Damn it.” He flopped back against the comforter, staring at the ceiling. “Fine, I know, we’re done.” His foot thumped against Steve’s knee.

“No, not—I didn’t get—shit.” Steve rubbed his face, feeling his brain

wanting to go home, and ready to switch off the lights. He punched his thighs, taking a deep breath, and felt microscopically more awake. “Hargrove. You—you *just tried* to fuck me out of being pissed off. You...threatened a *kid* to make me *attack* you.”

“Dumb doing it in the kitchen. Kinda surprised Max didn’t knife me.” Billy snorted wetly, and Steve wrinkled his nose, reaching over to the bedside table for a Kleenex, and tossing it at his face.

“We just...you *ran away* from me a couple hours ago because you think I’m some kind of...*baseball bat murderer*. ”

“Yeah,” Billy agreed again, sliding his toes under Steve’s t-shirt. He blew what sounded like half the contents of his head into the tissue, and Steve grimaced, tossing the box over. “Figured a straight guy wouldn’t mind a bunch of crying,” Billy laughed, sitting up to blow his nose again. He wiped his eyes. “Fucking figures. Never been so sexy, right.”

“I just—I don’t—” Steve couldn’t imagine Billy Hargrove *not* being sexy. “Are you even—”

“Fine, I get it,” Billy grabbed the growing pile of used Kleenex, and stalked off to the bathroom, “—get out, I might—might fucking whine some more. Shut the hell up, Billy, nobody gives a shit.” He slammed the door.

Steve groaned, letting himself tilt, slide along the headboard, and faceplant in the pillows. After a short asphyxiation period, he went and knocked. “Hargrove.”

“Washing my face, *Harrington*, why does all your soap look like pink goddamn glitter seashells, what the hell—”

Steve burst out laughing, letting himself slump down to sit against the door. “Y’know.”

“I know what,” Billy growled, as the faucet turned on, then off, then on again.

“I just need—I want to—” he sighed. Billy’s footsteps came closer, and thumped against the door. “I don’t think you’re...”

“*What*, Harrington, the suspense is killing me.”

“Holy Jesus, wait, I just realized you can *cook*,” Steve stared at all the matching furniture. “There’s fresh *bread* down there. Hargrove. Let’s go eat some *goddamn bread*.”

Billy opened the door and frowned down, and Steve leaned back against his leg, looking up at the now pink and fresh-faced Billy Hargrove.

“You’re a little glittery,” he informed him. “Much sexier.”

“...you’re falling asleep, aren’t you,” Billy sighed, but put a hand down to haul Steve upright. “Is this when the weird Harrington rituals start? Do I have to watch singing mice?” He wrinkled his nose, and Steve held on to his hand, dragging him downstairs. Just as they came around the corner of the stairs, the phone started ringing, and Billy stuck his face right up next to Steve’s as he picked up.

“We do this now, right,” he whispered, his mouth quirked, and Steve stared at his lips until the “Hello? *Hello?*”s from the phone finally caught his attention.

“Yuh,” he cleared his throat, “—uh, hello, this is the Harrington residence.”

“Hi, hon, sorry it’s late, this is Joyce, Joyce Byers?”

Steve’s heart shot into overdrive. “Hi, Mrs. Byers, do you need help?”

“Oh! No, no! I’m sorry—” She sounded frazzled, and they could hear Will’s voice in the background shouting ‘Mom! *Mom!* Let me talk to him first! C’mon! *Augh, Mom—*’ There was a brief muffling of what sounded like several voices and a dog at the other end, and then she returned, breathless.

Billy covered a laugh.

“I’m so sorry—”

"It's fine, Mrs. Byers," Steve put in automatically, making bewildered faces at Billy.

"I only just heard about Will's plans, I'm so sorry, are you absolutely *sure* your parents will be okay with it?"

Steve raised his eyebrows. "I am *absolutely sure* of that, yeah."

"Oh, good!" she sighed. "He said he'll just get a ride back with you tomorrow after the game, then, if you're *sure* you're up for giving up your *whole weekend*." They could hear Will in the background yelling 'Mooooooooom!' "I'm not supposed to tell you," she whispered, "but we went *grocery shopping*, and they had the *valentine chocolates discounted* —"

Billy and Steve were staring at each other as Will and his mom started giggling, fighting over the phone. Billy bit back a grin. "All weekend *boyfriend*, Harrington."

Steve scrabbled at his hair. "Jesus *christ*."

When Mrs. Byers hung up, Steve groaned, rubbing his face. "I'll talk to him at school. Didn't want to tell his mom he hadn't actually asked."

"We should practice—" Billy stepped closer, sliding his hands into the pockets of Steve's jacket, and Steve took a deep breath against the warm weight of his body, tempted to let himself get shuffled over to the couch.

"He's not coming *over*." He pulled away, stalking into the kitchen, and grabbing the bag of bread to tear off a hunk. He tossed the bagged bread to the table. "You fucking—you *threatened a kid* in here earlier. I know—" he pointed, stuffing a handful of bread in his mouth, "—jesus, this is awesome. I know you didn't *do* it, but what the fuck, *Billy*, what the hell is in your head—" He stopped to chew, turning back to the cupboards.

"I was good with Will," Billy hung back, then pulled out a chair as Steve started rattling around with jars of instant coffee and cinnamon, "—I can fucking *do* it—"

"No, *fuck* you, *Billy*," Steve caught his flinch out of the corner of his eye, "—what if I say I wanna hit my *goddamn math teacher*? I'm gonna look over and there you are with—with a—" he frowned around, "—a broken jar at Will's neck, yelling 'You'll never take me alive!' *Fuck* that...you want hot chocolate?"

Billy leaned back in the chair, crossing his legs on the table. "The fuck do you care, you're pissed as hell."

"Yeah, I sure as hell am." Steve raised his eyebrows. "I thought we were—I dunno, *friends*, maybe, I'm—I'm gonna be pissed for a *while*." He snorted. "*Billy*."

Billy winced again, pulling out his lighter and flicking the lid up and down, and Steve narrowed his eyes, watching him. "...soooo," he said, "—you'll just have to get used to me being a *grouch*, *jesus*. I'm mad at you. Ya noticed. You fucking want hot chocolate or not?"

"Whatever answer doesn't piss you off *more*." Billy shrugged, flicking his lighter.

"Nope. Okay." Steve leaned back against the sink. "You stay here. At—at my house, you're *safe*, okay, you stay here. Use whatever you want, eat whatever, use the shower, there's a washing machine—" He waved at the garage. Billy clenched his fingers around the lighter, mouth quirked. "—but. I know you apologized, I—I *kinda* get it—" he paced around, filling the kettle and setting it on the stove, "—but I'm—I can't just—" he felt his breath catch, and leaned against the counter again, closing his eyes, "—I don't have to—not saying I'll be a huge prick, not gonna *yell* at you, but I don't have to be *sweet either*, okay, I can *just ask* if you want some goddamn Swiss Miss. And get an answer. Without a bunch of bullshit. I'm not tiptoeing around like 'oh, my friend, would you *possibly* want some chocolate, could I *interest* you in a cup, *honored visitor*—" As he waved his arms around, Billy was smothering snickers. "It's not a tea party, I'm not getting out the fine china—"

"Sure, I'll take a cup," Billy ducked his head, biting back a grin.

Steve turned on his heel to face the table, holding a mug. "...Billy," he started, but Billy clenched his jaw, and Steve grimaced. "Uh.

You...um, I don't think you like me calling you that."

"You *don't* call me that." Billy shrugged, smirking over at the refrigerator. "I'll get used to it."

"Uh, no. Hargrove." Steve said instead. "Sorry."

Billy swallowed, ducking his head. His ears were red, and, unusually, his cheeks, since he'd scrubbed the makeup off his face. "I don't think you know what being pissed off *means*," he muttered, and Steve stuck a leg out and pushed Billy's chair an inch across the floor.

"No, dipshit, I'm fucking normal! *Normal* pissed off. Normal pissed off means I stomp around and I don't *fucking* want a *blow job* and if you're in danger I suck it the *fuck* up and put up with your bullshit *here*."

"I wasn't in *danger*." Billy rolled his eyes, then twitched as Steve swung around, but didn't step closer.

"Oh, yeah, huh? What was that about." Steve flapped his fingers at his own face, nodding to Billy. "Those bruises. Huh? Why the fuck did he grab your face?"

"...wanted to know where I'd been," Billy whispered, watching him.

"Yeah, that is not how you ask questions, *Hargrove*—" Billy was listening, but his eyes flickered following Steve's hands, and Steve deflated against the counter. "...shit. I said I wouldn't yell at you. Sorry."

"That was yelling?" Billy snorted, and Steve turned away to stare into the cupboard.

"Sorry," he emphasized. "Your dad *fucking* pisses me off, but I didn't mean to take it out on you—" he glanced over his shoulder, "—you're a fucking asshole, but I'm just—so fucking—I'm way more pissed at your dad."

Billy laughed, shaking his head. "You don't even *know* him. He's not —"

At that, Steve came over, hands spread. “I don’t—I don’t goddamn need to, this—” he moved his hand slowly to cup Billy’s jaw, and ran his thumb over the bruises. “This isn’t okay, *Hargrove*. There’s nothing *fucking* okay about this.” Billy blinked a few times, his eyelashes tickling Steve’s palm, and took a shaky breath, and then the kettle whistled.

Steve stepped back over to study the mugs, deciding whether Billy still needed a bird flipped at him, or whether he needed to be proclaimed *World’s Best Mom*. After searching through *I Believe In Santa Claus*, *I Thought You’d Like This Mug From Pennsylvania*, and *Fill Your Day With Rainbows*, he selected one declaring the drinker *Saving Myself For Tom Selleck*. He took the rainbow for himself.

When he turned back at ask about marshmallows, Billy had his head buried in his arms. His neck showed red through his curls, and Steve resisted his lower torso’s urgent suggestion that he gather Billy up, haul him upstairs, and see where things went. He gritted his teeth, dumping instant coffee and marshmallows in his mug.

“...think I solved the case of why you can’t sleep,” Billy mumbled, as Steve scooped in twice what the jar suggested.

“I try to sleep tonight and I’ll probably call a SWAT team on Puff the Magic Dragon,” Steve sighed, plonking the mixes, spoons, marshmallows, two candy canes, and Tom Selleck mug in front of Billy.

“What the *shit*,” he read the mug, cheeks reddening further, “—we know *that’s* not true.”

“Sorry, Tom Selleck, I got there first,” Steve turned back to the cupboard to hide his pink cheeks, “—we’ve got you covered if you believe in Santa, too,” he waved like Vanna White showing off a car, drawing a headcock and and a deep frown from Billy.

“...what.”

“There’s an ‘I Believe In Santa’ mug—” Steve started to grab it, and Billy reached out and smacked his leg.

"I get it. Go fucking—go turn on your mice."

"Nah, no mice," Steve sighed, but picked up his mug, and wandered out to the living room. He didn't turn on the lights. When Billy followed, narrowed eyes on the half-melted marshmallows threatening to overflow his mug, Steve was curled up in the contested corner of the couch with the clear view of the kitchen and front door.

Billy sighed, sipping the edge of his chocolate down before gauging a foot of space between he and Steve and lowering himself carefully, tongue between his teeth as he tried not to spill his chocolate. "So," he glanced over.

Steve was watching the windows, wondering—again—whether constant outdoor lights would be better than motion detectors. "Huh?" He slurped the marshmallow foam off the top of his coffee, and chewed the grit.

"No mice?"

Steve shrugged, his eyes straying back to the windows.

"...don't you sleep better when I'm here? Thought that was the whole point," Billy sucked marshmallow foam off his candy cane.

"I did." The couch cushions bounced as Steve grabbed for a blanket and yanked it over, and Billy's eyes widened at the waves in his mug. "That was before you pulled your *bullshit* again, so I'm *pretty damn sure* you just make everything worse now."

"...I can think of *another* way to get you to sleep," Billy glanced over. His tongue gleamed in the light as he licked his lips. "—I mean, it's my fault, right. Because of...earlier?"

"Yeah, it's your fucking fault, and I *don't want to fuck you*, shut up."

Billy bit his lips and nodded, a few more times than necessary.

"...sorry I didn't..." Steve sighed. "I could tell you were flipping out. Earlier. I should've—"

“Nah,” Billy’s shoulders relaxed a smidge as he laughed. “I thought I knew what was gonna happen. Guess I *didn’t*,” he frowned over, “—since you’re fucking *Ste*—”

“I should’ve hauled you upstairs or something, though,” Steve shook his head, slurping more of his coffee, and considering another cup, “—sooner. I can usually—” he flailed a hand, “—y’know, calm you down—”

Billy was watching him talk with an expression Steve couldn’t identify in the dim light from the kitchen. “Harrington,” he interrupted. “I wasn’t—I can’t—think right, when I’m—like that. It wouldn’t—I’d probably have torn your fucking head off if you tried to haul me somewhere, I think I...”

Steve tipped his mug back for the last lumpy trickle, turning his head to lick the inside edge. “Fwhat.”

“...you’re so *gross*,” Billy whispered. “How are you so fucking hot, you’re *nasty*.”

Steve rolled his eyes. The motion detector lights hadn’t come on, which meant he probably didn’t need to wander around in the snow with a bat, but it *was* likely to burn some energy off, and it’d be *quiet*. He hadn’t really thought about how much time he’d always had alone until the herd of piglets started regularly invading. He flailed to his feet, hitting Billy with the blanket. “I’m getting more coffee.” Naturally, his new asshole roommate trailed after him. He rolled his eyes at the microwave.

“If I hadn’t lost it with Max here, I might’ve tried to kick your ass again,” Billy sipped his hot chocolate, and Steve turned on his heel to stare at him.

“...fucking...*fuckhead*,” he whispered, and slammed the door to the microwave. “I’m—going outside.”

“I mean—it wouldn’t have worked,” Billy clunked his mug on the table, trotting after him to stand in the door to the garage. “I didn’t—you could’ve just yelled at me—”

“Are you telling me it was a good thing? You threatening Max?” Steve grabbed the nailbat, twirling it in the air as he meandered over to the garage door opener. *If I walk toward him with the bat, he’ll lose his shit, and right now I might not care as much as I should.*

“No,” Billy held his hands up, wandering *in the garage* as the door raised, and Steve groaned, “—come on, you stuffed me in a trunk, and I got over—”

“Screw you, no.” Steve pointed with the bat automatically, then braced it over his shoulder as Billy’s chin jerked up. “Screw you. A bunch of *scared Goonies* shoved you in that trunk because you nearly beat my goddamn *face* in. You beat me to *shit*, you fucking—I was —” He started to gesture with both arms *and* the bat, then let it thud firmly back onto his shoulder. “You beat the *shit* out of—I woke up *slurring*. You don’t get to just *scare kids* because—because of what they did to stop you *last time* you were a fucking psycho. Just—” He took a deep breath, turned to face the outdoors, and smacked the garage door opener again, ducking under it as it closed.

Billy didn’t follow him out, so he stopped to crouch, dropped the bat alongside his foot, and had a long scream into his sweatshirt.

The air freezing the inside of his nose was a better wakeup than the coffee would have been, he figured, and far from the drifting snow reminding him of the Upside-Down, it mostly reminded him of wandering out to patrol after Billy’d showed up drunk, cracked his head on the bolt of the door, and cried in Steve’s lap over his mother. “Euuuugh,” he groaned again, then turned back towards the house. There probably wasn’t any more broken glass from Billy hucking bottles at his house, he *thought*, but he shuffled up to the door anyway, kicking the snow off the step to either side. The door mechanism had been stiff ever since it met Billy’s skull, and he took a deep breath before throwing it open. “Hargrove—oh.” Billy was standing in the kitchen, half-turned—*he’s been pacing*. Steve bit back a humourless smile.

“Can I apologize for kicking your ass.” Billy held his hands up, eyes lowered.

"I dunno, can you?" Steve shut the door behind him, after kicking the snow off his shoes. Billy paced around the kitchen again, and Steve took pity. "Yeah. Sure, man, go ahead."

"I'm—"

"Wait—" Steve opened the door to the garage. "Lemme put this thing away—" He wagged the bat, ducked into the garage, and thought for moment about the sincerity of Billy Hargrove apologies, and how they had a tendency to sound like random begging. He poked his head back out. "And you don't—I'm not gonna throw you out, or anything. If you don't apologize." When he wandered back out, after grabbing some of the pile of marshmallow bags he'd bought with Max—*god, was that today? I feel like I'm forty-five*—Billy was sitting at the table, flicking his lighter again.

"Sorry I—just—sorry I attacked that kid Max likes."

"His name's Lucas." Steve blinked at the rainbow and Tom Selleck mugs, clean and upside-down in the dish drainer.

"Sorry I attacked you when you defended Lucas—why didn't you use the *bat*, it was—" he cracked his neck, grimacing, "—it was *right there*."

"This is some apology." Steve grabbed a mug.

"No, I know—" Billy stopped.

Once Steve finished with the Swiss Miss, he frowned over his shoulder. Billy had his arms over his face, mumbling. Even his *arms* were red.

"...almost done filling Tom Selleck with marshmallows," Steve informed him, and Billy choked, coughing.

"You had the bat the whole time," he groaned into his hand.

"Yeeeeeep." Steve added just one more shake of marshmallows to his mug.

"I almost *beat* you to death and you didn't—you didn't use the bat."

“Yeah, I know, I noticed that too,” Steve rolled his eyes, adding some more marshmallows. “You don’t have any *nails in your head*, how about that. Might not *change* much, actually—”

Billy drew a long shuddery breath, and then another. “Forgot—forgot you could’ve. M-Max had it. But it’s *yours*. You were there with it. You could’ve.”

“Yeah, I *could* have.” Steve shook out some more marshmallows, and they rolled off the mound in the mug onto the counter, so he stuck his hand in the bag and clapped a handful into his mouth.

“Shit. The fuck am I *doing*.” Billy leaned his head in his arms, sniffing. His shoulders shook, and Steve rolled his eyes, shoved another handful of marshmallows in his mouth, and stepped over to knock on the table before sliding his hand up and down the back of Billy’s neck.

“The fuck should I know,” Steve sighed, and Billy leaned against his stomach.

“You’re not gonna hit me with the bat,” his laugh against Steve’s sweatshirt was muffled and wheezy. “—you’re not.”

“That’s right.” Steve cocked his head, mouth quirking, and ran his fingers along the bright-red top of Billy’s ear.

“...shit. I’m fucking—I’m so sorry.” Billy cleared his throat—a couple times, because there was a lot of wet going on, as far as Steve could tell. There was probably going to be a pool soon, dripping off the table. “Sorry you got dragged into my bullshit. Sorry I—glad you were fucking *there*, so I didn’t *murder a kid*,” he clenched his fists in his hair, taking a few loud breaths as he tried to speak evenly, “—sorry I fucking—attacked you like—fucking feral—” he choked off a sob, and Steve squeezed his shoulder. “T-too bad your—your *blue Chuck Norris banana* didn’t eat me.”

Steve huffed a breathless laugh, grabbing a chair and scooting close to pull Billy’s head and shoulders against his. Billy was snickering wetly into his sleeves, and Steve rested his face against his hair. “Congrats on not getting eaten by a blue banana,” he whispered, and

Billy cackled, leaning into him harder. His sweatshirt was warm against Steve's palm as he rubbed distractedly along Billy's spine. "...that's my sweatshirt. You thought I...what, I was standing in the snow to get my *sweatshirt* back?"

Billy snorted, and pulled away, standing to bat at and grab a paper towel, and blow his nose. "Nothing you do makes sense, Harrington."

"No, it does, I mean it usually kinda does." Steve crossed his arms as Billy shifted his weight, glancing from his chair, where he'd been leaning against Steve, to Steve's face. "...I don't even wanna know what time it is—"

"We could sleep on the couch." Billy ducked his head, doing the *thing*, Steve thought with annoyance, where he looked up through his eyelashes, and smiled just for you. Steve wondered whether he rehearsed it in the mirror.

"Not sleeping on the *couch*," he growled. "And let Tom Selleck stay filled with marshmallows?" He raised his eyebrows at the mug, mounded up and surrounded with the little rainbow pillows.

"Man surely deserves a few marshmallows." Billy stepped closer. "I'll stay at the other end."

"Christ." Steve took his hand, sliding his fingers between Billy's. "Your room?"

"Yes. Yeah." Billy nodded, grinning at their hands.

After a while of squinting at this new Billy Hargrove, who was wiping his eyes on his sweatshirt and getting his earring caught, blushy-eared and apparently delighted to *hold hands*, Steve allowed himself to be drawn upstairs. It felt like the weight of the day was finally settling on his shoulders, Billy's fear in the restaurant, and Max's fury, and somewhere Neil Hargrove's malevolence weighting his eyelids. He wondered whether he was leaving a trail of squeezed-out adrenaline on the stairs. "Seems like it'd be neon," he muttered, ignoring Billy's headcock, and crawling into the middle of the bed.

Billy hesitated at the edge of the bed. "Probably don't want me taking my pants off," he prompted, glancing over, and Steve flailed a hand.

"Get some sweatpants then night."

He woke up to Billy crawling up next to him, and laughing. "...you're out already? You didn't even get under the blankets. Somebody cut your strings?"

"Mmm." Steve flopped an arm over him, scooting closer, and nuzzled his face against Billy's warm shoulder.

"Shit," Billy sounded hoarse again, and Steve squeezed him tighter. "How come you're so damn good to me?"

"Shut up," Steve mumbled, waving his other arm around to pull Billy's head against his to make the noise stop.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you so much for wandering in! Lemme know if you liked my story--I lovelovelove hearing from people! Kudos! Short comments! Long comments! Questions! Constructive criticism! Comments as extra kudos! Thanks so, so much! XD

(I try to reply to each one, but if you don't want a response to your comment then please say "No reply please" or "Whisper" so I'll know not to reply.)

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7. Advice and pillowforts

Summary for the Chapter:

How about an almost entirely silly chapter? No reason to suspect my suspicious generosity.

As far as subject goes, this one's pretty light! As for LENGTH, though, I've gotten some comments on chapter length, so fair warning--have your tea ready, a comfy spot, a length of yarn to find your way back, let your loved ones know where you are, and pack healthy rations and plenty of water--this one's long!

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks as always @tbehartoo and @shaycora for cheerleading!

I realized I haven't been giving specific warnings because my memory is awful, and that's crappy of me! (If you see anything I should warn for in previous chapters, lemme know, I want to go back and fix it) but this chapter I think we're pretty clear? Billy's away from his dad and got some weird coping mechanisms Steve's trying to figure out, they disagree for a lot of the chapter, but they're working on that and they're trying to be nice to each other. Pretty sweet chapter, all told.

SOME NOTES: I went back and ADDED 3K OF STEVE AND BILLY TALKING TO THE LAST CHAPTER! It's at the end, it starts in the middle of the phone conversation with Joyce. IT IS KINDA IMPORTANT TO A DISCUSSION THIS CHAPTER.

Also! Note the new chapter titles! =D

Steve jerked awake to a loud thud, and Billy's voice from the floor next to the bed.

“Fucking *minute*, I’m *on* it.”

Steve groaned and rolled away, pulling the pillow over his face, and trying to breath slowly so his heart would stop pounding.

“Just—just wait, I have to—” Billy’s voice went quieter. “Shit, wait. Is—Harrington?”

Steve swallowed. His mouth was dry, and he licked the inside of it, grimacing. “...sleeping.”

“Did you wake me up?” Billy sounded entirely too alert, his voice coming from somewhere below the edge of the bed.

Steve slapped his hands to his cheeks a few times, and sat up. “Eugh. Why are you *awake*.” He rubbed his face.

“...thought I was home.” The springs squeaked as the mattress shifted. “Needed me to make a cake. Like the pink and blue one. With the mice.”

“What?!” Steve lifted the blankets, flailing a hand in the dark to grab Billy’s arm and pull him back in the bed. “You...you dreamed your dad woke you up to make a birthday cake?”

“Might have been Cinderella at the time,” Billy mumbled, letting himself collapse across Steve’s stomach.

“You spend too damn much time weightlifting,” Steve wheezed, falling back on his pillows. “God. Ow. Did you have mouse friends?” He tapped at Billy’s butt like it was a set of bongos.

“Shut up,” Billy muttered, kicking his feet up, which put *more* weight over Steve’s lungs.

“You woke *me* up,” Steve moaned. “*CinderBilly*.”

“Want me to make you a cake?”

Steve laughed, shoving at Billy’s ribs until he rolled just enough to allow him to breathe. “Right *now*? Fuck yeah.”

“Fuck you,” Billy groaned into an armload of covers.

“Cake.” Steve bent his knees, straining his abs but rolling Billy a few inches the other way.

“You don’t want my cake.” Billy squirmed around to snicker against his shoulder. “S’why my dad started dating again. Sick of my shitty cooking.”

Steve’s mouth fell open, and he squinted up into the darkness. “...what an asshole.” His stomach growled, and Billy snorted into his shoulder, but didn’t budge. “...he really do that shit? Wake you up in the dead of night to *cook*?”

“Nah,” Billy mumbled, breathing against his collarbones. “Just if he needed to. Found out about something I did. ‘FI forgot to clean something. Did my homework wrong.”

“He couldn’t talk about it when you were *awake*?” Against his chest, Steve could feel Billy’s heart slowing from the same thudding hoofbeats as his own. “Jesus. You just...never knew what he was gonna do, did you.” He slid his fingers up through the silky heat at the back of Billy’s head, and Billy curled closer. “...if you’re CinderBilly, am I the prince.” Steve narrowed his eyes up through the darkness, and Billy laughed, punching his arm. “Whoa there.” Steve grabbed both of Billy’s fists and held them, awake enough to process the danger that was Billy feeling feelings. “Go back to sleep.”

“Mmm.” Billy yanked at his arm, and Steve shifted to hold his hand.

“Sleep, dude, you don’t have to sing and scrub the floors here.”

“That almost made *sense*,” Billy growled into his neck, twitching so his elbow brushed Steve’s ribs. “I know too much about your *goddamn mice*, Harrington—”

“Not really, the cake’s in the other one,” Steve started giggling. “That’s the fairies, not the mice.”

“*Fuck* you.” He yanked his fist out of Steve’s hand, gripping his shirt instead. “So much wrong with you.”

His warm weight felt like it was directly affecting Steve's eyelids. "Yeah, Nancy hates 'em." Steve could feel Billy's laughter warming his neck, the ribs against him shaking with it. "She yells at them too, she said if the fairy couldn't turn the evil stepmom into a mouse, she wasn't very good at her job."

The next morning, Steve swore *again* to stop sleeping in his clothes—the down comforter was like a cloud around them, but his jeans had sandpapered a line around his waist and down his inner thighs, and his crotch felt like a crumpled brown paper bag—but Billy's back was warm against his chest, so he squeezed tighter, his face heating at the startled "Oof."

"How you doin'?" he asked, nuzzling the sweaty curls, and Billy squirmed against him.

"Shit, for somebody who doesn't want my dick, you sure spend a lot of time waking it up," he groaned.

Steve narrowed his eyes, checking the time, then sighed. "We better get up, though, I need a shower."

"Fuck you," Billy mumbled, rolling onto his face. "Shit. God. Bet you don't even have food."

"I've got Eggos." Steve folded his arms behind his head instead of sliding one up between Billy's shirt and his side, and smoothing it along his ribs. He cleared his throat, and swung his legs out of bed, standing to stretch.

"Eggos aren't *food*, Harrington," Billy groaned again, into the comforter. "Have you got eggs. Fucking...cereal, even?"

"Did you *buy* any cereal? I have no idea what goes in bread," Steve asked in innocent tones, and Billy sat up with an open-mouthed glower, before he saw Steve's grin and growled. Steve wandered to the door, planning to at least change into pants that weren't trying to replace his flesh. "Look, we can get McMuffins."

"Also not food." Billy rubbed his face.

"I think there's Kraft dinner." Steve waggled his eyebrows, and Billy started hucking pillows as he closed the door.

He kept his shower brief, imagining Billy slamming around his kitchen, ripping the cabinet doors off in a rage and biting them in half. *I've seen too many monster movies*, he reflected, working in his shampoo. When he wandered out in a towel to rummage through his drawers—the slacks he'd worn to try and look classy for Nancy were softer than his jeans, he thought, probably, crouching to run his hands over a row of folded pants, all scientific-like—he could smell the beginnings of food again. He almost slid down the stairs in his stocking feet, yanking the slacks on, t-shirt in hand, to stick his face in whatever Billy was doing.

"I'll clean up," Billy called up as the stairs creaked, and Steve vaulted the last four stairs, sliding up next to him at the stove. "After we eat, so it doesn't get cold. If your *gleaming counters* can handle my filth that long—all you have are *eggs*. The eggs you bought for *bread*."

Steve leaned his chin on Billy's shoulder, whispering "Hey, little woman, can I get a sandwich—" and Billy hipchecked him away to lean against the counter. "That smells good. Why don't you leave the dishes, and I'll get 'em tonight?"

"...if you really don't care," Billy eyeballed him, then, inexplicably, reddened again. "Shit." He rubbed his face, turning away.

Steve blinked, then pulled his shirt on, grinning. "Need any help?"

"Get some plates," Billy muttered. "Get some more bread on 'em."

"Yep." Steve busied himself finding a big knife, then settled for a steak one—Billy groaned—and rummaged for a cutting board. "...you don't have to watch me the *whole time*, I'm old enough to play with scissors," he shot over his shoulder, after catching *yet another* glance from Billy.

"You're fucking *not*." Billy stepped over to slide both arms around him, pulling the steak knife away. He was warm and solid against Steve's back, and Steve grinned, letting his head loll back against Billy's shoulder as he listened to everything in the drawer banging

together.

“Why do you keep *knives* in your *kitchen drawer* ...you aren’t even paying attention,” Billy huffed into his hair, and Steve laughed, feeling his cheeks heat.

He lifted his head to see Billy holding up a longer, *scarier*-looking knife. “Okay, okay, why do I need a huge—*saw*.”

“It won’t squish the bread,” Billy whispered against his ear, sitting it next to the bread. Steve rolled his eyes, sliding his arms back around Billy’s waist, and leaning forward to lift his toes off the ground. The smell of sizzling eggs filled the air. Billy laughed, grabbing him around the shoulders, and leaned to lick his ear. “You want me to ride you, cowboy?”

“Fuck no.” Steve lowered him back down, his whole face hot as he felt Billy’s dick hard against his ass.

Billy shoved away, opening the fridge and staring into it.

“Uh,” Steve swallowed, rubbing his face. “Sorry.”

“Eggs are almost done,” Billy just stood there with the fridge open.

“No, really, sorry I keep—I don’t wanna fuck with you.”

“Yeah, I got that.” He slammed the fridge, keeping his back to Steve as he slid back over to the stove.

Steve cringed, and started sawing at the bread, stuffing the crooked bits in his mouth. It was just as good as it’d been the night before, fluffy and sweet against his tongue, yellow with eggs and butter. He placed the nicest slices on Billy’s plate.

“Sorry,” Billy grunted, turning to grab a plate and shuffle two sunny-side-up eggs onto it.

“No, it’s—”

“I don’t—I don’t know what you want, you keep—” he sighed, handing over the plate. “Shit.”

“It’s my fault too, I keep grab—”

“This egg’s all squished up.” Billy stood holding the other plate. “Look, it’s like me, completely *fucking* unappealing.”

“What,” Steve tried to say, around his mouthful.

“Did you finally *notice*.” The drawer rattled as Billy slammed it open, grabbing a fork.

“Notiff wha,” Steve asked, chewing the egg off the edge of his plate, and waving his hand for a fork.

Billy rolled his eyes, sliding one across the table. “Fuck if I know,” he poked at his plate, “—fucking...Mark of Cain, I don’t know, whatever the fuck *everyone sees* about *Billy Fucking Hargrove*.”

Steve swallowed, leaning his chair back on two legs to frown at the clock. “Wait, what?” He slurped down the rest of the eggs, tipping his chair upright, and got up to slide his plate in the sink with one hand, and pull Billy against him with the other. “C’mere, no.”

“Stop petting me, I’m not a goddamn dog.” Billy let himself tip against Steve’s shoulder, and Steve raised his eyebrows, bracing his feet.

“You’re hot as hell,” he said against Billy’s hair, trying to keep his tone businesslike. “Can—can I kiss you, if I don’t wanna fuck you.”

“Fuck yes—” Billy yanked him against the sink, sliding his arms around Steve’s neck, and laughing so his breath warmed Steve’s lips. His gaze flicked from Steve’s mouth to his eyes, then dropped again. “Do it. Maybe you’ll change your—”

“No. *Dude*.” Steve leaned his head away. “Shit. Come on, we’re gonna be late. Can I *just kiss* you.”

“You can do whatever the fuck you want,” Billy muttered, but leaned in to Steve’s press of lips with a soft noise in the back of his throat. His grip on Steve’s shoulder and in his hair was nearly painful, and Steve wrapped both arms around him and leaned back a bit, lifting him off the floor again. Billy laughed against his mouth, hot and

eager, and Steve lost himself in the weight of Billy's muscled body against him, the lingering taste of cigarettes and tequila behind the toothpaste, and the zing down his spine towards his dick.

"Crap, we'll be late." He got one more kiss in, pulled away from the slight stickiness of Billy's fruity chapstick, ran to grab his bag, and then dashed back into the kitchen to find Billy with his head on the counter, wrapped in his arms. "...you okay there, Hargrove?"

"Fantastic." Billy pushed off the counter and grabbed Steve's jacket, grinning as he linked their arms like Steve was escorting him to the ballroom.

Steve hauled him in close to get through the door to the garage, and ended up pressed to the doorframe, with Billy's mouth on his again. He didn't comment on the tequila flavor. "...don't think I've ever seen you in such a good mood," Steve mumbled around the soft kisses, and Billy laughed against his jaw, kissing along the patchy stubble he'd intended to shave.

"You like me so much better with my mouth on you." He went to lick into Steve's mouth again, and Steve pushed him back.

"What—no I fucking don't."

Billy jerked away and walked over to the car. "You fucking do, just let me..." He rubbed his face, leaning against the door as Steve clicked the garage door opener and climbed in his car, then slid in the passenger side. "Come on, Harrington, just—you know it'd put you in a better mood—"

"You think I'm in a *bad mood*." Steve started the engine and pressed the gas harder than he intended, rocking them both forward as they shot back into the driveway. Billy's hands clenched white on his knees. Steve clicked the garage door closed, and took a deep breath. "I'm not in a *bad mood*, I'm *fucking pissed off*. I'm not going to *like you more* if we're fucking. Or *kissing*. Hargrove."

"Yeah," Billy's voice croaked.

Yes, *sir*, Steve heard, and bit his lips together, turning on to the road.

He slid his hand over to squeeze Billy's. *The fuck do I say.* He ran his thumb over the side of Billy's hand. "I'm not any *more* mad at you..." he tried, and Billy snorted. "Okay, I kinda am," he groaned, and Billy huffed a laugh. "—but it's just—it's not—I'm mad you think I—you—" he growled in frustration, leaning to see around the turn onto the bigger street.

"That was clear as mud," Billy cocked his head at their hands, and turned his palm up, and Steve flashed a grin at him.

"I don't like you more when we hold hands, either—" Billy snatched his hand back, looking away, but Steve kept his where it was. "But maybe it—makes you feel better, kinda, if we—if I still like you enough to hold hands? When I'm mad?"

"You're making no sense again," Billy smacked his hand back over Steve's. "You fucking—you want to touch me or don't you."

"I *want* to, *jesus*." The heater hadn't really engaged, and Billy's fingers were cold. Steve squeezed them. "I just—I don't want to fuck you, and—and have you think that's—that that's why you didn't get hit."

Billy laughed, ducking his head. "The hell does that mean. I'm not—I'm not *brainwashing* you with my cock, I'm just—"

"No, listen," Steve squeezed his hand. "You want me to let you keep staying with me. You want me to like you, so that—so I keep being nice to you. Right?"

"Not rocket science." Billy frowned at his face, then returned to studying their hands.

"But I don't—I don't *have* to *like* you. You can stay as long as you—"

"*Fuck* you, Harrington," Billy yanked his hand away again, folding his arms, "—you were the one all 'I thought we were friends'—fine. I'll stay in my goddamn lane."

"No, shit, wait, that's not—"

"Oh, goody, we're here." Billy opened the door just as Steve turned

into the parking lot. Steve slammed the brakes as the door swung wide, and Billy grabbed his bag, and climbed out. "See you."

Steve found a parking spot and groaned with his face against the wheel. He looked up at a knock on his window to see Nancy, eyebrows drawn inquiringly, and opened his door. "Nancy," he flapped a hand behind his seat for his bag. "Morning. You remember that time I was sick and we watched soaps for a week?" He felt the strap slide between his fingers, and yanked, letting the force propel him onto his feet out of the car.

She wrinkled her nose.

He turned to face her, moaning, "I'm *living* in one."

She bit her lips together, suppressing a snort. "Oh no, Steve," she waved her hands, and he huffed at her obvious insincerity, "—were you kidnapped and replaced by a clone, who was murdered and disguised as a pinata for a child's birthday party?"

"Uh, ha, no."

"Did you try to frame your crush for murder by poisoning fish fingers with WD-40, before being locked in the walk-in freezer where you set your deadly trap?" she asked, wide-eyed, and he snickered.

"Shut up, no!"

"Was your entire life dreamed up by your dog?" She rolled her eyes. "The dog you *don't have*, probably, *maybe*, maybe you got *amnesia* when your foot slipped in *spilled milk* and you *forgot your dog*—"

"I'm sorry," he gasped, sniggering. "I'm so sorry I made you watch them. Why did you listen to me? I was so high off Dimetapp—"

"I wasn't leaving you with your parents gone," she rolled her eyes, "—all alone, while you kept thinking I was Purdue Pete?"

He blinked. "The...mascot for the Boilermakers?" She nodded, eyebrows raised, and he moaned into his hand. "Jesus christ, no

wonder you dumped me."

"I got a real education that week," she covered her mouth in simulated horror, walking backwards ahead of him, "—did you find out Billy is not, in fact, your possessed brother after all, but your *mother*, visiting from the *past*?" She made jazz hands. "Is the moustache her *disguise*? Noooooo!"

"Oh my god," he cackled, leaning against the classroom doorway, in an attempt to breathe. "*No.*"

There was a substitute teacher, so Nancy sat next to him in the back, edging their desks together as the sub struggled with the reel-to-reel film projector.

She leaned in again. "Did the orangutan you hired to nurse your secretly insane and captive mother fall in love with you, and throw the pictures of you she'd cherished off the train as she journeyed to forget her love for you that was never meant to be," she whispered, and he buried his face in his bag, wheezing. "Did he leave you tied to a motorcycle, covered in honey, hoping you'd get killed by a bear?"

"No! He might. But no!" He grinned over at her, watching her tap her notebooks straight on the desk before sitting them in a tidy stack, and check her pencils for lead. Once the movie started up, she leaned closer.

"Okay, spill."

"Now?!" He frowned around. The closest person was asleep three seats away, the kids closest to the teacher's desk were playing poker for Skittles, and the sub was flat on the desk with her parka over her head. "Oh. Uh." He cleared his throat, swallowing. "So. Mr. Hargrove. He's—worse than I thought—"

Her eyes widened. "How could he be *worse*," she hissed back.

"I know! He's a fucking asshole, he called *me* up and told me if I hung out with his son I'd die in jail, basically, Billy's all bruised up, he's got, like, fingermarks—" he wrapped his hand around his face,

pressing in, and she grimaced. “—he’s not letting him get a *job*, or— or *sleep*, or use the *phone*, or leave town—if he drives anywhere that isn’t school his dad calls the cops on him—he won’t let him get his car fixed, so he’s *stuck* there all the time—”

“Jesus, Steve.”

“—but Billy’s a *mess* over it, he thought I was mad yesterday, he and Max, they—they really thought I was gonna *kill* him, not like—” he waved his hand, “—you and me mean it, ‘he’s gonna kill me’, y’know —” she nodded. “He—he tried to start a fight last night and I got mad and threw him in the garage—”

She leaned away to look him over. “Are you *okay*?”

“I’m fine!” he whispered back, “—now, I mean. But I did my—I kind of—freaked out, y’know, and went and stared in the bathroom mirror for a while and sat on the floor in there—”

A muscle worked in her jaw as she gripped her pencil.

“And when I came out Max said Billy’d gone *home*—”

“Nooo,” she said again, sincerely this time, and he nodded, covering a laugh.

“Yes! Right, thank you!” he whispered back. “*Noooo!*”

“Is—is he at school today? Did you talk to him? Is he—”

“I, uh.” He dropped his face in his hands with a groan.

“Steve.” She bumped his shoulder with hers.

“Y’know how you need to murder me because I’m stupid,” he mumbled through his fingers.

“You didn’t go yell at his *dad*.” She grabbed his arm, and he shook his head.

“Not that kinda stupid. I...went to his house...and told him to pack and come back with me?” He cringed over, as she cocked her head.

"I crept around the back of his house and threw *snowballs* at his *window*."

She clapped her hand over a squeak, glancing up towards the front of the class. "You did the balcony scene."

"No, it wasn't funny, he kept asking if I brought my nail bat," he ran his hands through his hair, slumping, "—he only came because he thought Max was gonna tell and get him in trouble if he stayed. It's so shitty. He keeps trying to figure out what pisses me off."

Her lips thinned. "That sounds awful for *both* of you."

"It's so bad! He kissed me this morning and then said he wanted to keep kissing me because I like him better that way!"

She frowned, cocking her head. "Don't you?"

"No!" he said, too loud, and the parka over the teacher twitched. "No," he whispered. "I don't want him—he's trying—he thinks if he keeps me happy, I won't *hurt* him, imagine if—if Mike—or *Will*, or *El* said they'd do whatever we wanted to keep us happy, kept trying to—to do stuff for us because they were scared—"

"Eugh," she sat back in her seat, eyes wide, "—do you even know if he...didn't he *start* coming over because of his dad? Does he even *want* to—"

"See! You get it!" he hissed back, leaning his head on his hand. "I *think* he's into it, but Max said—" *Wait, none of her business, really—* "Uh, Max kinda said he's done it before, had a relationship with somebody to get himself out of the house. Not—romantic." He made a face at the implications behind Billy and his "deliveries."

She covered a grimace, leaning her face on her hand. "Is this even...I mean, do you even...*like* him? Does it *matter*? I mean it matters that he's out of his dad's house, don't get me wrong, but—" she spread her hands, "—can't he just...get a job now, or go back to California—can't you just—*not kiss him*, ever again?"

"I." He frowned at the screen, folding his arms.

“Steve.” Her eyes narrowed.

“Uh. Yeah, of course.” He ran his fingers through his hair, swallowing. “Obviously. I mean, it’s Billy Hargrove, I shouldn’t *be* kissing him. Ever. In the first place.”

“So why *did* you?” She cocked her head. “I’ve got soap operas on the brain, now, tell me it wasn’t for undercover work. Did you think he was your long lost—”

“*Ha*, uh,” he cut her off, “—no.” He turned face-front to watch the film, clearing his throat. “He, uh, he kissed me. In—first. He kissed me first.”

“...that was pretty obvious, I thought,” she leaned forward to see his face, “—but you didn’t...*stop* him.”

“Shut up.” Steve leaned his chin on his bag.

“...annnnnnnd you don’t want to date anyone else.”

“No, it’s just—this whole monster thing.” Steve rolled his eyes, dropping back in the seat and crossing his arms.

“That is a problem, but *Steve*. Billy Hargrove doesn’t know *either*.”

“...no, I, uh, I actually—I told him. Everything. Most things. I didn’t tell him about Eleven, I didn’t know if she’d want him to—”

“*Steve*,” she hissed.

“I had to get him to climb out the window! He wanted to know what I’d been hitting with a nailbat!” The dude two rows up with the heart sunglasses, who’d been snoring when they started talking, lifted his head and gave them a long look. Steve dropped his voice. “It got him out the window. Sort of. He still thinks—ugh. He thinks a lot of—bullshit.”

“Well, that’s a given,” she wrinkled her nose, “—your parents are out of town *again*?”

“Yeah.” He shrugged.

“So you don’t even have to see him, he can stay in the other room—”

“Yeah, uh.”

“...wha—”

“He keeps cooking me *breakfast*,” he let his head loll back, sliding down in his seat, “—he watches stupid cartoons with me. We’re—” He swallowed his sentence, deciding on the fly that *we’re sleeping in the same bed, and I like it*, was more than Nancy needed to know. “I don’t...hate it.”

“...yeah, that’s what I’m hearing...” She was squinting at him, mouth quirked.

“I don’t want him to think I stopped making out with him because he...” he opened his mouth, closed it, steepled his hands, and blew through his fingers, “—he’s a fucking *mess*, I just...”

“So don’t, then.” She waved her hands. “Or do? Can you like—tell him what you’re telling me?”

“Can’t kiss you, you’re a fucking mess?”

“That’s perfect,” she rolled her eyes, “—‘I don’t hate it’ was great too, write that down, I’m sure we saw that in some really heart-rending proposals. It’s definitely in *Romeo and Juliet*.”

“*What does Romeo and Juliet have to do with anything*,” he hissed, cheeks flaming.

“Sorry,” she rolled her eyes, “—*Mercutio and Tybalt*, then.”

“What?!” he mouthed.

“Is this the soap opera part? He’s gonna drive off and you’ll like. Lasso a horse. ‘Billy! I don’t hate you! Come back!’”

Steve muffled a snort. “Shut up! I’m not gonna say anything!”

“You sure? Even though you *want* to kiss him? For some reason?”

“...he doesn’t get it. He thinks I’m just...” He wrinkled his nose. “He thinks I’m pretending he’s *you*. Jesus. The whole time. I mean, my own *hand* would be better than a *dude* with a *mustache* to—”

“Yeah, stop there,” she held up a hand, “—gross. Ew. *Steve*.”

He smirked. “You asked.”

“I did *not*. *Eugh*. Do you *care* what he thinks?”

“No.” He folded his arms. “I don’t give a shit. Come on, Nancy.”

“So you definitely shouldn’t talk to him,” she sighed gustily, the noise covered by the slightly off-center clacking of the film projector, and the narrator mispronouncing ‘dude’ as ‘dooday’. The two people watching snickered.

“Talk to him about what,” Steve muttered. “Thought you *wanted* him gone.”

“Yeah, I’d love to see him shoved in a post office bin marked ‘return to sender’,” she snorted. “And shit, I’m trying real hard to be patient, Steve, with my ex going ‘Oh no, he misunderstands when I kiss him, he makes me breakfast, I sleep better *beside* him, he watches my dumb cartoons—”

“...that doesn’t sound like me,” Steve said on autopilot, eyes wide as his brain furnished evidence otherwise. “I—I didn’t say all that. Exactly.”

“Why are you having this conversation with *me*,” she groaned. “Why do you even *want* him?”

You’ve never seen him happy, he didn’t say. “That—the—with Will. He’s—he’s good with him. And it’s not just—” *He sleeps on me, and it’s just—sleeping, it’s just—I’ve never done that*. “Um.” *I flipped my shit and he tried to make me hot chocolate and show me cartoons*. “He—uh, he makes bread.” *I think...he wants to be friends, maybe*.

She turned to squint at him for a long second, then bit her lips, reached over, and patted his hand. “Did you tell Hopper about...everything?”

"I did!" he sighed, leaning back to join her in staring past the screen. Now that his brain had got rolling, it was hard to get it to stop. *Makes sense he'd want me happy, he just doesn't want me throwing him out.* "I mean, not the—I didn't tell him about the kissing."

She shook her head. "Yeah, no."

"But he's keeping an eye on Max, and they won't pick Billy up and take him home all the time anymore."

The PSA on the *Radical Unhipness Of Smoking* carried on, and Nancy sighed. "How's this gonna work, Steve? He's just gonna live with you? You said you *fought* again?"

"Yeah, I mean, he didn't swing at me or anything," he hugged his bag, "—I...kinda told him I'd give him some money. To get out of town." *I mean, it's not like I'm using my college fund.*

"Steve," she stared over, "—money from...your parents? That seems like *such* a bad idea."

"It's that or he *lives in my house!*" He dropped his face against his school bag, smacking the bridge of his nose into the edge of a textbook, and swore loudly enough that the substitute raised up under her coat like a monster from the deep. Steve pressed both hands to his face as his eyes teared up. "Nancy, help, I'm so stupid my backpack just punched me in the face."

"Oh, Steve." She patted his shoulder, and he groaned. "Let me know if—if there's anything I can do. I could run his dad over, maybe." She leaned her chin on her elbow, gazing into the distance between her and the screen.

"Might end up taking you up on that." Steve touched his nose, grimacing.

After second period, Steve's teacher pulled him aside, congratulating him on paying attention in class—*Wow*, he nearly laughed, *their expectations are so low*—and asked if he could stay after school. So did his third period teacher. And fourth. When Max and Eleven

ambushed him as he ate lunch, and asked for a ride to the arcade and then home after school, he winced. “Uh. I gotta stay after.” They frowned at each other.

“We can’t really get a ride from Jonathan and not invite Will.” Max shrugged.

“We could walk.” Eleven clenched her fists and bounced like she was going to shoot off from the ground.

“What if,” Steve grimaced, “—this is probably too stupid.”

“Probably. Go on.” Max raised her eyebrows.

“What if I give Billy my keys? Eleven can keep him in line.”

“What, *really*, Steve, *already*,” Max groaned, smacking his arm.

“I think he would do it,” Eleven nodded, “—he takes me for waffles.”

“What,” Max stared at her, “—wait, he did?! When—”

“We could get *waffles*,” Eleven nodded, “—and then the arcade.”

Steve was trying not to giggle. His eyes stung. “Yeah, here, take my keys, ask him. If he says no, you can always walk to the arcade and I’ll pick you up tonight.”

“Why the hell—why don’t we just do *that*, you can pick us up later—” Max sighed. “He just doesn’t want me walking home in the snow in the dark, it’s not—”

“They have strawberry syrup,” Eleven coaxed, and Max glanced between her and Steve.

“He’s been a real sack of shit lately, El.” Steve went to tuck his keys back in his pocket, but Max held her hand out for them, sighing. He frowned at her. “Don’t steal my car *yourself*.”

“We can ask. If he’s a shitbird about it, we’ll wait for you.”

El frowned, crossing her arms, but listened.

Steve dug out his wallet, and some fives. “Here, take some—”

Max laughed, stuffing them in the pocket of her plaid shirt. “Thanks, Dad.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You were gonna try and make Billy treat?”

“I get an *allowance*.” She linked elbows with El, but winked at him as they ran off.

Billy must not have been more than usually obnoxious, because when Steve made it out to the parking lot—finally—his car wasn’t there. *Dustin* was, flat on his back across a picnic table, with a pen in his mouth, analyzing a textbook. Steve dropped to sit on the bench, and Dustin grinned, stuffing his homework away. “Gimme a ride to the game tonight?”

Steve glanced around. “Assuming my car comes back, yeah.”

“Your car,” Dustin raised his eyebrows. “You let it wander off? You got a goddamn...migratory car, Steve?” He beamed over. “Where’d it *go*?”

“Uh,” Steve leaned back against the table, looking at the sky. *At least it stopped snowing.* “Billy’s got it. Probably taking Max home.” *Unless Max stole it. Also likely.*

“...like, *hours* ago,” Dustin rolled onto his stomach, leaning off the table to frown at his face. “...sooooo. Billy.”

“What?” Steve sighed, rubbing his face.

“Billy Hargrove,” Dustin prodded his shoulder, “—you’re what...friends now? He knows *I’m* your best bestie, right. He better not fuck with that. I’ll bite him. Pin him to the ground like a K-9 cop.” He gnashed his teeth, giggling. “I can *do* that now.”

Steve snorted, coughing. “Don’t fight over the friendship bracelets.”

“So?”

“So what.” Steve turned to look at him, and sighed at the slight grin

and raised eyebrows.

“He’s what, okay now? I don’t see any bruises.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Not gonna hang out with...” *Wait, no, that’s exactly what I’ve been doing,* he pinched the bridge of his nose. *Hanging out with somebody who beat me until I couldn’t say words.*

“Steve,” Dustin slapped his bookbag, “—Planet Earth, calling Steve Harrington. Come in, Steve Ha—”

“*This* is Planet Harrington, detecting alien life form. Aiming lasers.” He grabbed Dustin’s notepad, rolled it, and made machiney noises, staring through, and Dustin wailed in anguish.

“No! No! This alien comes in peace! PEACE! AUUUGH!” From the parking lot, a guitar riff wailed, backing up their action scene, and switched off.

“Vrrrrt!” Steve wagged his fingers at him, and Dustin went into death throes, and then stopped, grinning past Steve’s elbow.

Steve swung around to see Billy standing there with his eyebrows raised. He tossed the keys, and Steve caught them, frowning back up to see Billy hunching into his sweatshirt and stalking away. “Wait. Hargrove.” He waved at Dustin to sit back down, and trotted after Billy.

“What, *Harrington*.” He rubbed his face, shivering.

“Where you going?”

“Jumped my car. Do you...are you still...”

“Oh, good,” Steve rubbed his arms, “—call around and figure out where you can take it, I’ve got a credit card I can give them—” Billy nodded, closing his eyes for a second, and Steve folded his arms to keep himself from pulling him in by the sweatshirt. “Want a ride?”

“Don’t think I’ve got any *pretending to be a person* left in me tonight,” Billy snorted.

Steve blew in his cupped hands. “Oh, okay, right. I can drop Dustin home.”

“...what?” Billy frowned behind them—a little vaguely, and Steve resisted the urge to grab his shoulder.

“You been drinking?”

“No,” Billy ducked his head, folding his arms, and leaned against a tiny beige VW Rabbit, “—just tired, shit. Lemme go.”

“I’ll pick you up some dinner, okay?” Steve took a step back, trying not to block him in.

“...what?”

“God, you’re wrecked, you should sack out when you get back. Come on, you can just hide in the back seat—Mike’s game’s tonight, put up with me for a few hours and you’ll have the whole night to yourself.”

A UPS van swerved up next to them and braked in a shower of silt and slush, not even bothering to find a parking space, and Billy grunted, shielding his face. “Not really in a hurry to get *home*, Harrington.”

“Jesus, Hargrove, you’re soaked.” Steve reached out, saw Billy’s tight expression, and held his hands open and away. “Lemme be backup at your dad’s, come on. We can hit the drive-through, or did you get waffles?” Steve wished he’d hauled Billy somewhere more private, away from Dustin’s curious stare—where he could yank him close—then remembered about ninety reasons that wasn’t a good idea. It was hard to keep track, though, of why he shouldn’t kiss Billy, when he was dripping snowmelt and gravel, and his shoulders shivered up around his ears. The dry bits of his sweatshirt looked soft, and Steve’s fingers itched to clench in it and yank him close. “I *really* don’t want you freezing solid, or getting your head caved in, come on, let me give you a ride, okay?”

“...you’re hanging out with one of your...your hatchlings,” Billy growled, pushing himself off the car, and brushing the snow off his butt. His jeans were dark and wet from the knees down, and now

most of his seat.

“Yeah, but you being *safe* is more important,” Steve said slowly, watching his face, which went blank, like when he was furious, or when he was listening to his dad. “Hargrove. Will you come back to the car?”

Billy turned to face the other way, taking a long breath, then turned back. “...he’s not even home—and I need a fucking *walk*. Or something. Smoke.”

“I’ll see you at my house, though?”

“Yeah, later.” Billy bit his lips, frowning at his shoes, glanced up, and then down again, kicking his feet in the slush. “Am I dismissed, or what. Do I need to *report in*.” He shoved by, splashing in the half-melted snow.

“Hargrove!” Steve caught up, trying to lean and see Billy’s face. “What the fuck. What’s got you all—did something happen?”

Billy laughed, breathing into his hands. “I’m just—I’m such a dumb *fuck*,” he whispered. “Send me out with the *kids*. How’d I do on the test, Harrington? You call your girlfriend at IHOP to make sure I didn’t murder everyone?”

It’s so hard not to just grab him when he’s like this— “What? No—”

Billy’s hands shook as he wiped his face on his sleeves. “I’m not fucking—*forgivable*, fine, I knew you wouldn’t decide to—or did—did I fuck up somehow? What’d I do, Harrington, they *fucking thanked* me—”

“No! No, *jesus*, *thank you*, by the way. Again. Thanks for taking them.” Steve tried not to feel too guilty—it *had* been a test, of sorts, after all, and if Eleven hadn’t felt the need to break Billy’s fingers, he’d probably passed just fine. “I just couldn’t take them, and they wanted to go. Don’t freak out, they just wanted waffles. *Thank you.*”

“Yeah. Sure.” Billy turned away again, and Steve elected to let him stalk off rather than chase him down again and pressure him about

meals. He brushed the van-silt off his jacket as he wandered back to Dustin, who swung his legs around and sat up.

“What was he *doing* with your *car*, Steve. What if there’s a body in the trunk. What if he used it in a hold-up. What if somebody dropped ice cream on his shoe, and he beat them to death with your tire jack. *Steve.*” He grabbed the keys from Steve’s hand, running around the car to press his face against the back windows, and open the trunk, then slid in the driver’s seat while Steve was still frowning at the ground, thinking about dumb Billy Hargrove. “Hey. Earth to Steve. I’m driving.”

“No.” Steve shook his head, rubbed his face, and wandered over. “Get out. No bodies?”

“He left some music in here,” Dustin held up a handful of cassettes, climbed out, and peered after Billy, who was just turning out of sight down the snowy sidewalk. “Must have dumped the bodies and cocaine somewhere else. Think he stole your sweatshirt to cover the blood?”

“Shit, that *was* my sweatshirt,” Steve glared, “—it was still *fuzzy* inside, too.”

“Welp,” Dustin shrugged, sliding in the backseat and reclining with a long sigh, “A wolverine stole it, he’s gonna nest in it—”

“I actually threw it at his face earlier—”

“Well, you don’t want it back *now*, it’ll smell like a drunk barfed up cigarette butts.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Oh come on, he smells *good*. Ish. Usually.”

“...Billy Hargrove smells good,” Dustin repeated in a flat voice. “Steve. Your nose is broke. He smells like an alley behind four neighboring bars.”

“Not after a *shower*. ” Steve started the engine, and paused, frowning over his shoulder at the parked UPS van filling most of his rearview mirror. He slowly eased the car a few inches back, turning to shove Dustin’s head down. “I mean, he wears cologne, he’s got nice

shaving cream. Fancy curl shampoo. Leather jacket. Y'know what, he *washes*, maybe it's a California thing, you wouldn't know about it. What the hell is with this *van*. Asshole."

"...uh-*huh*," Dustin leaned between the seats to squint at him, then smacked the back of his seat, "—after a *shower*. Why were you—"

"I thought starting with *hair-stylin'* tips was enough, didn't know I needed to explain *showers*," Steve snickered, backing a few inches, spinning the wheel, and pulling forward a couple as Dustin kicked his seat, laughing. "Get down so I can see, this asshole behind us just abandoned his van—"

"Shut the hell up, I shower! So. Uh. Steve, um, what's...*Tommy* smell like?"

"How the hell should I know, probably..." Steve adjusted the side mirror, his tongue sticking out in concentration and distaste, "—uh, sweaty basketball jerseys, I guess, and whatever *Carol* smells like, maybe...Juicy Fruit gum." He cranked the wheel around, grimaced into the mirror, and pulled forward again.

"Whatever, huh? What about Barb."

"*Barb*." Steve reversed again, leaning around to look out the back, but stopped to frown at him. "I never got close enough to smell *Barb*." His now several-point turn slid them silently past the bumper of the van, and he threw his arms in the air and whooped. "He shoots, he scores!"

"Mmmhm. Nerd." Dustin reached around to poke his shoulder. "Annnnnnd what's *Nancy* smell like?"

"Don't be gross," Steve rolled his eyes, and on out of the parking lot. "Why the hell do you care."

"It's for science, Steve, go on."

"You know, those awful candles her mom burns, clean laundry, strawberry lipgloss—this is nasty, shut up, I'm not telling you what my ex-girlfriend smells like."

Dustin leaned forward between the seats, beaming, and Steve eyed him warily in the rearview mirror. “I think I reeeeeealized somethiiiiing,” he sang, dragging out the words, and digging his chin into Steve’s shoulder.

“What!? Put a seatbelt on, you fucking gremlin.”

“Holy *jesus*, are you *listening* to yourself right now, lordy. Steve Harrington has gone where no man has gone before,” Dustin shuddered, then surged up alongside Steve’s face again, “—what’s *Nancy* think of—oh my *god*, she *totally knows*—” He collapsed back on the seat with a thump, his legs kicking up.

“The fuck is wrong with you today.” Steve had been considering drive-through burgers, but a straightjacket was sounding more useful.

“Oh my god, D&D, I just—I just—” Dustin shrieked, voice muffled, then punched Steve’s seat, “—*that’s* what was going on—you *asshole fuckhead*. I’m supposed to be your best friend.”

“What,” Steve sighed, pulling in to McDonald’s, and taking satisfaction in ordering cheeseburgers when Dustin was yelling for quarter-pounders, and a black coffee when he wanted a chocolate shake.

“You’re such a dick.” Dustin settled back, betrayed. “Fired me as a best friend without so much as a pink slip, and now you’re making me punch you in the face to steal your dinner.”

“I never know what the hell people are mad at me about,” Steve sighed, tucking the bag of food on the floor behind his feet, and smacking Dustin’s hands when he tried to get at it.

“Who *else* did you piss off?” Dustin made grabby hands. “Surrender the fucking fries, man.”

“Start making *sense*— oh, wait.” Steve pulled off abruptly at the hardware store and climbed out, engine still running, and Dustin swore after him.

He jumped back in the car in short order, and avoided Dustin’s quizzical stare—he’d climbed over into the passenger seat to get at

the food stash.

“Steve Harrington,” Dustin hissed. “What the hell did you need in the hardware store.”

“I dunno.” Steve rolled his eyes, flushing, as he pulled out into the road, and Dustin poked his face with a french fry, then gasped.

“Oh shit, is it a weird sex thing?”

The car swerved, and Steve grappled with the wheel. “*What?!*”

“I thought I *knew* you, man,” Dustin groaned, flopping his seat back like it was a fainting couch, and answering every one of Steve’s increasingly bewildered questions with a long sigh. Finally, Steve trailed off, staring at the road, and Dustin elbowed him. “...what is up with you, seriously.”

“...Uh, if,” Steve bit his lips together, squinting at the road, “—what if...every time you were mad about anything, I said we could watch Ghostbusters. Like, over any—”

“That’s random. You’d be awesome. I like this Steve. Fuck yeah,” Dustin munched a french fry, “—finally some good taste.”

“No, not like—okay, *Will* then. What if every time you like—slammed a door or—bitched about homework, he stepped back and said ‘Okay, let’s watch—’”

Dustin had his head cocked. “*Will likes* Ghostbusters.”

Steve sighed, turning onto his street. “I *used* to like Ghostbusters, until you—never mind. *Damn* it.”

“What are you even—” When they passed Billy sitting in his Camaro in the driveway to pull into the garage, Dustin dropped his face in his hands, groaning. “I hoped I was *wrong*. Son, *make better choices*.”

“What?! Seriously, the fuck is up with you today,” Steve snorted, feeling his face heat further. He grabbed the bag of burgers back, and the coffees, and let Dustin get the door into the house.

“Here, go on in.” Steve handed over *one* of the burgers, and *some* of the fries, ignoring Dustin’s face journey from disbelief through disapproval to eyebrow-wagging conspiracy, and opened the front door to tromp over and crouch next to Billy’s window. “Hey—” He caught a glimpse of Dustin’s sneakers lingering in the doorway, and stood to glower.

“Hurry up, Steve, you’re gonna freeze to death,” Dustin yelled, leaning down to wave at Billy before closing the door.

“...what was that?” Billy was frowning after Dustin, and Steve crouched again.

“Here—” He turned Billy’s cigarette hand to place two keys in it.

“...what...” Billy turned his glare on the keys, then Steve.

“My car,” Steve pointed, “—and my house. Do you need to park in the garage? Because there’s the other car in—”

“The road’s fine,” Billy’s voice sounded husky, and he cleared his throat, “...this is still you being pissed at me, huh?”

Steve’s lips thinned. “Yeah. I am. I’m gonna be for a while.”

“Yeah,” Billy laughed hoarsely. “...what else you gonna do?”

Steve handed over one of the coffees. “I’m gonna ask if you have any money for food. Do you? We got burgers if you want one.” Billy was looking at the coffee cup, mouth slightly open, and instead of kissing it, Steve cleared his throat. “You looked like you could use some caffeine. Want a burger and fries?”

“...okay,” he frowned over, “—am I allowed inside? I know you’ve got—”

“Jesus, yeah, it’s cold out here,” Steve stepped back, yanking the door open, “—come on, Hargrove, come dry off. The hell happened to your jacket? My sweatshirts aren’t *that* warm.”

“Sorry,” Billy laughed, sounding like something was stuck in his throat. “Didn’t get a lot of chance to pack.”

"We can ask Max to grab it. Come on, dude, or are you frozen there." Billy swung his legs out, and Steve grabbed his hand and pulled him upright—slowly, so as not to spill the coffee. "Do you have any money? Seriously. I know you don't have a job."

Billy opened his mouth, then shook his head, sipping the coffee and wrinkling his nose.

"Okay," Steve ran his hand up and down the spine of his own sweatshirt, on Billy's back, nudging him towards the door, "—what if you go shopping tonight. Get some food. I'll pick you up and pay."

"I don't fucking know what you want." Billy hunched his shoulders, but didn't lean away.

"Get shit you'll eat." Steve shrugged. "I'll eat anything."

"I can't—"

"Seriously," Steve held the door for him, "—anything. Whatever you want."

Dustin was at the kitchen table when they came in, biting a french fry in sliver-sized increments with his new front teeth. Steve yanked his hand from around Billy's waist, pressing the bag of food into his hand. He escaped Dustin's narrowed eyes by trotting up the stairs to his room, and dropped his bag in front of his desk so he could trip over it later. When he wandered back down, Billy was curled up in their favorite couch corner, and Dustin's feet were kicking from under the couch.

"I think he likes it down there," Billy muttered, and stuffed his burger back in his face. Dustin let out a long, wavering gasp, and the laserdisc for *Ghostbusters* spun out and across the floor to hit Steve's foot. Steve kicked it back.

"How *dare* you," Dustin scrambled back out from under the couch. "I go looking for my favorite movie, because somebody kept *talking* about it, and this *interloper* has to tell me it's *under the couch*? Steve. Why. Why are you *lashing out* at the *only people* who love you."

Steve. *Is it puberty?*”

Billy pressed a napkin over his mouth, his shoulders shaking.

“...fine, go for it, I see you two are against me—” Steve walked over and flopped in the other corner of the couch, grabbing the McDonald’s bag and yanking out another burger. He jerked his head towards Billy. “He’s fresh meat. I made a Stay-Puff Man joke and he didn’t know what the hell I was talking about.”

“Yusssssss,” Dustin whispered, scuttling over to the TV. When it came on, he paused it, stood, and frowned at the couch cushion between them, before smacking his hand over his face. He stalked over and *wedged his butt* between Steve and the arm of the couch—Steve called him a fucking gremlin shithead—and *shoved him bodily* until Dustin had a good three feet at one end of the couch, and Steve was only keeping himself out of Billy’s lap by bracing his arms to either side of his shoulders.

“What in the *shit*— there are *chairs*—” Steve punched back, but settled in against Billy, who frowned between them, then dropped his gaze to his burger.

“Shut up and let me ignore you, I’m trying to eat, *god*.” Dustin shuddered.

When they’d *finished* eating, and Steve was trying to decide what to do with the hand brushing Billy’s, Dustin made a gagging noise and tossed a blanket over them, and in about thirty seconds Steve was dozing off in the warmth, his and Billy’s fingers interlocked. He jostled awake a couple times, when Billy’s shoulder under his head shook with laughter, but kept his eyes shut, and let himself drift.

Steve woke to his face pressed between Billy’s back and the back of the couch, Dustin and Billy’s low voices, and Dustin kicking his leg. He snorted, shoving around with his elbows and smacking the couch until he extricated himself.

“...yeah, I see what you mean.” Dustin sounded like he was barely

restraining laughter, and Steve rubbed his face, letting himself drop back against Billy's lap.

"You both suck."

"You drool in your sleep," Billy informed him, grinning down, and Steve groaned, pulling the blanket over his head.

"So I actually came over for a *reason*," Dustin announced, and Steve raised his head, listening through the blanket. "*Besides* showing a—an *Imperial spy* the best movie on earth. Yeah. So pay attention, it's already a short gaming session for you padawans, Mike'll kill us if we're late from watching *Ghostbusters*," Dustin nudged Steve's leg, "—again."

"M listening very carefully," Steve mumbled, feeling Billy's legs shake with laughter under his head.

"Steve," Dustin moaned. "Get *up*. I got you a walkie-talkie."

"No," Steve heaved himself upright, batting the blanket away, "—why."

"So if we *need* you, we can talk to you somewhere that doesn't have a *phone*." Dustin was rolling his eyes, rifling the backpack he'd leaned against the couch. He pulled out two walkie-talkies, flourishing one at Steve. "Here. The batteries last a long time—"

Steve leaned close, rubbing his face, but listening, partially propped upright by Billy's splayed hand on his back. Midway through his lecture, Dustin leaned around Steve and threw the other one into Billy's lap.

"Fuck! Jesus," Billy tried to protect his crotch with the hand he had supporting Steve, then smacked it back between Steve's shoulder blades before Steve finished flailing for the back of the couch, "—the hell everybody got against my cock, *christ*."

Dustin grinned. "I've got a spare anyway, they come in pairs—"

"Fuck you *and* your spare cock," Billy muttered. "Fuck you with both. The hell does this thing even work."

“Oh, here,” Steve swung his legs around to lean into Billy again, ignoring Dustin’s grimace. “You want me to *show you how to handle* —”

“Oh my god,” Dustin gagged. “Do not finish that sentence.”

The two of them leaned over the walkie-talkies, head to head, and Dustin had to yank Steve back around by the shoulder, then surrender and sit crosslegged on the coffee table in front of them to explain channels. After explaining their party channel, and Mike and El’s channel—at this, he wagged his eyebrows—Steve held his hand up. “That. I want that, get me and him a channel.”

“...oooookay.” Dustin raised his eyebrows, nose wrinkled.

“I don’t wanna hear all your guys’ bullshit,” Steve reached out and messed up Dustin’s hair, and got his hand smacked. “If you need somebody to come over with a bat, you can use our channel.”

Billy nodded, clicking buttons.

“We’ll just leave them on, and if you need anything—” Steve took a deep breath, feeling some bone-deep part of his shoulders unclench for the first time in months, “—if you idiots need help, we’ll know.”

As they tried to leave, Billy followed Steve around with a grocery list, suggesting foods, and broke his pencil when Steve insisted he didn’t care. “Seriously, just buy whatever. I’ll just call when we’re wrapping up, if you want, so you don’t have to wait, and meet you there—oh!”

Billy was trying to show Steve roast beef and potatoes on the list, and Steve pushed it down, frowning.

“Probably don’t answer the phone, since he knows the number. If I need to call, I’ll—I’ll yell into the message machine, turn it on. Oh, and you should probably pull into the garage.” Dustin’s eyes were darting between them, head cocked. “And I’ll keep the walkie-talkie on, if—if anything happens.”

Billy took a shaky breath, following him to the hook where he kept his keys. “You gotta give me something, Harrington. Burgers?”

Steve blinked. “You’re gonna make burgers? Jesus, you can stay as long as you want.” Billy froze for a second, before huffing a laugh, turning on his heel, and tromping upstairs.

Dustin cleared his throat, but waited until they got in the garage. “...sooooo. Max is staying with *Lucas* this week. *Hopper* agreed to *lie* and say she was with them, but they’re going to visit El’s mom this weekend. So *even though it’s a school week*, Hopper talked to Lucas’ mom, and Max Hargrove is staying with them the whole week.” Dustin drummed his fingertips at the window as Steve unlocked the car.

“Good.” Steve nodded, taking another deep breath of relief.

“Annnnd *Billy* Hargrove’s staying in *your* house.”

“...uh.” Steve glanced over to meet Dustin’s gaze, and scrabbled at his hair. “I know it’s a shitty idea, but their dad is—he’s the fucking *Fuhrer*.”

“Huh.” As they pulled away, Dustin was watching the door to the kitchen.

The first post-Billy D&D night started smoothly, with Max and Eleven’s heads together—Steve grinned, reminding himself to ask Billy about that. He pulled Will aside. “I didn’t want to tell your mom you hadn’t *asked*,” he tried to channel Hopper’s no-nonsense voice, and Will bounced on his toes, “—Will. I—you *can’t*. Some—Hargrove’s—he’s staying. For a while. I’m full up.”

“I can sleep on the couch,” Will beamed, “—I’ll bring my *Nintendo*.”

“No.” Steve held his hands up, and Dustin frowned over. Steve stuck his hands in his pockets. “Stay with Mike or somebody. Can’t do it. Maybe some other time.” He turned and walked back to the table, unable to look into Will’s wide disappointed eyes, or risk Billy and Will staying in the same house.

Dustin was muttering with Mike over in the corner, making notes on his pages, and Mike was trying to yank them back. Nancy crouched down with them, and they all started whispering and scribbling, so Steve leaned down between Max and El.

“...how were waffles?”

They exchanged a long glance, and then El stared at Steve, chewing her lip.

“...fine?” Max grimaced.

“...shit, what happened—” Steve yanked a chair over to sit between them, and they both bit their lips.

“Nothing...” El prodded her dice.

“It was fine. Billy was fine, it was weird, actually—” Max frowned, like she’d just *remembered* Billy, and Steve opened his mouth to ask what the hell he was missing, when Mike looked up, saw Will and Steve sitting down, and clapped over his head for attention.

“Go siddown,” Max hissed, and Steve raised his eyebrows, but moved around between El and Dustin.

“So!” Mike thumped his notes against the table, eyes narrowed at Dustin. “The, uh, that little town-girl that made those pies you liked,” Mike said, to general nods, “She starts crying!” He raised his eyebrows at El, and she nodded, leaning in. “Just, like, bawling. She runs away from you to her mom, yelling ‘They’re scary too!’” Mike spoke as the little girl, in a very high voice, and Lucas cackled into his arms.

“We’re not scary!” El bit her lips. “I...I get down so I’m smaller.”

“I tell her we’re here to protect her,” Lucas rolled a die, and snickered. “Uh, *damn*, she will *not* believe me, I must’ve dropped a huge knife out of my sleeve, or—”

“Oh *no*,” Will leaned to look at his rolled die, “—I say ‘Oh, ignore him, he’s harmless—’ he rolled his own. “...ugh, crap. I...just...set myself on fire or something, give me a different die, this one’s broken

—”

“The little girl’s still scared,” Mike passed one over, raising his eyebrows, “—moreso, now, actually—”

“Uh, I’ll try telling her we’re just passing through,” Steve leaned to see what El had rolled, waggled his fingers, frowning over his dice, and then checked over his character sheet with his tongue sticking out the side of his mouth, “...I...pass? I think?” El leaned over to check, and nodded.

“Okay,” Mike nodded. “She says ‘If I make you more pie, will you promise not to hurt us? It’s good pie. Please don’t hurt us.’”

“*Augh.*” Steve thudded back in his chair, and Dustin shot a grin at him, wagging his eyebrows. El, Lucas, and Will leaned in, talking over each other.

“I will tell her we do not need pie!” El waved. “We are here to *protect* her—”

“Wait, we shouldn’t all *shout* at her—” Lucas held his hands up quellingly.

“I’ll teach her how to use a *fucking axe* so she doesn’t have to bribe adventurers with pie,” Max rolled her eyes, “—but I’ll stand over, uh,” she tapped the map. “Out of the way, while you all calm her down.”

“...I’m gonna ask if other adventurers have hurt them.” Dustin rolled, and Steve glared at him, feeling his cheeks heat.

Mike cleared his throat. “She says yeah, they come in with big swords, and they break things, and she asks if you want a pie.”

“I’m going to put my weapon down on this crate,” Lucas says, steepling his fingers, “—and I’ll say her pie is really, really good, but we won’t hurt her whether she decides to make us any or not.” He rolled it, and he and Mike exchanged nods. Dustin kicked Steve’s leg, jerking his head significantly toward Lucas, and Steve kicked him back.

Mike threw an eraser. “Dustin! Hello!”

“Sorry!” Dustin pursed his lips, eyes narrowed. “I’ll toss mine over there too. And—I’m gonna try introducing her to everyone?” He pointed to Max, and Mike mimed rolling a die, so he did, and stuck his tongue out at the interruption. ““That’s our Zoomer, Maxamelia —”

“*Do not* call me that *ever* again.” Max pointed her pencil.

The corner of Dustin’s mouth quirked. “*Maxamelia* can be scary, but she’s mad *because people scared you.*”

“Shut up. I guess, I mean, basically,” Max wrinkled her nose, “—what is she, like, a toddler? What *asshole* scares little kids.”

Steve winced.

“Okay, yeah, I’ll introduce myself too,” Will rolled it, and groaned. “...the dice say I will *not* introduce myself. I think I. I must have...fallen over? Maybe I just slid.”

Lucas leaned to look at his roll. “...how are you failing so *hard*? What’d you do, threaten her? Flash her? Did you slip on a *banana peel*?”

“No!” Will shouted, eyes huge.

Mike squinted at them, and rolled what sounded like a handful of dice. “Okay, Pie Girl thinks he’s funny,” he pointed at Will, then Max, “—she’s probably gonna dress like *you* for Halloween, and she thinks maybe the rest of you are...okay?”

“I’m going to ask if she’d like a hug, and tell her...” El rolled her die, frowned at it, and it lopped over one additional time. “And I pass my persuasion check, so I tell her—”

“...you cheated.” Lucas stared at her.

“Good for her,” Max snorted, and Will giggled.

El held her hand over her nose, and Lucas rolled his eyes, and handed

her a napkin to wipe away the bloody evidence of her telekinesis. “I hug her and tell her we’re here to help, and not for her pies.” She blew her nose. “We’re happy to meet her and her pies, but she’s—she’s *surprise* awesome.”

"That seems like a good thing to say to someone scared and trying to bribe you," Dustin said, waggling his eyebrows at Steve. He flicked his gaze towards El, raising his eyebrows, and Steve felt his cheeks heating as he tried to hide his face behind his character sheet.

After several minutes of the entire party—including, eventually, Max—reassuring the little girl, she threw her arms around El, and told them the story of a long-ago hero who had fought the vampire with a huge wooden stake, or bat, that had been destroyed—its nails yanked out and melted, and the wood itself burned.

Dustin kicked Steve’s leg, and grinned when he looked over. “I got you advice,” he whispered.

“Shut up,” Steve whispered back.

"Because I'm a genius," Dustin pretended to admire his fingernails, and Steve kicked his chair again, harder.

“My mom knows more about the weapon,” Mike clutched his rolled notes worriedly, in character as the small girl—it sounded a lot like his little sister, to Steve’s ear, and he bit back a grin—and Max grilled Mike on the village’s legend that it hadn’t really burned up, though it still burned like the sun.

“It was one of a kind,” Mike narrated, as the mom, in a slightly lower falsetto. “It was once possessed by the vampire’s brother, Sergei von Zarovich, the...” Mike paused, stared at the line, and glared over his shoulder at the door to the rest of the house. “My dumb sister made him a baseball player. The vampire’s *brother*—”

Dustin cracked up, falling into Lucas, who tried to keep a straight face until he looked at Mike’s disgusted grimace.

“The vampire’s *brother* is a *baseball player*,” Mike repeated, as Max beamed, and El listened to Will explaining why it was funny. “This is

Nancy's fault, she's being—stupid. It's—ugh.”

“Does he play for the Hoosiers?” Will giggled, and Lucas cackled, leaning his face on the table.

“It's hilarious, keep going.” Max leaned her chin on her hands, grin wide.

“Uuuugh,” Mike groaned. “—the vampire's *baseball playing brother* —”

“Does he turn into a bat at night?” Dustin asked, snickering, and Mike groaned, folding his arms over his head and hiding behind his notes.

“This is so *dumb*, I *hate* my sister, she's such an *asshole*—”

“Did they make him play batboy?” Steve asked, leaning back to fold his hands behind his head, and Max snorted.

“You all suck,” Mike threw an eraser at Dustin, who was laughing the hardest. “*In its original form*, it had silver nails pounded throughout, and it was soaked in holy water. Strahd—”

“Who the hell is Strahd?” Max frowned around.

“The *vampire* in love with *Steve*,” El whispered.

“*Strahd*,” Mike smacked his hand on the table, “—employed a powerful wizard named Khazan to destroy the weapon after his brother died.”

“No!” Dustin gasped. “He died?! My baseball-playing vampire hero! We barely met!”

“Steve's true love!” Will suggested, and Steve snickered.

“*The first part of the process*,” Mike shouted over the commentary, “—required the nails be pulled from the bat, which Khazan accomplished. He melted them down, but in the meantime, his apprentice stole the bat and fled! He later located his apprentice's mutilated corpse in the Svalich Woods, but the bat was nowhere to

be found. To avoid the vampire's wrath, Khazan told Strahd that the entire weapon had been destroyed—*but*,” Mike whispered, “The apprentice was secretly a member of the resistance! She was delivering the bat to be protected, for when the time of our revolution is nigh! It is currently wielded by—*Nancy!*” he bellowed up the stairs. “Nancy, what is this shit!”

“Shoulda checked first.” Max sat her chin on her hands, grinning, and Lucas dodged as Mike leaned around and punched Dustin in the shoulder.

“Ow, I didn't do it!”

“Everybody needs to stop fucking up my *game*—”

“Come on...” Max' grin was ever more feral. She threw an arm around Eleven, who giggled. “Out with it.”

“Euuuuugh,” Mike groaned again. “It's currently wielded by the *pirate revolutionary, Nan Wheeler*—”

Max cackled, dropping her head to Eleven's shoulder, and Eleven's eyes narrowed.

“You can put yourself *in the game*?” she asked, as her smile grew.

“No, okay, no,” Mike flapped his notes at her, “—no. Nancy's an asshole. Anyway, *I guess* if you want the Illustrious Sun Bat, you have to trace her ship and challenge her to—”

“I'm doing it!” Max's hand shot into the air. “Lucas! El! I wanna famous...bat. I guess.” She cracked her knuckles. “Come with me.”

Lucas and El punched the air in unison, without looking at each other, and Steve wondered when *that* friendship had gotten close.

Mike waggled his eyebrows, now committed. “—thus proving to her that you are worthy. Her true weapon is a pirate revolver, but she guards the sacred Sun Bat until the time has come to —*jesus*, Nancy, nobody cares—”

“Read it!” Dustin yelled, and Max, Lucas, and El punched the air

again. Steve followed suit.

Mike groaned. “Eugh. Okay, the wood, which is sapient, knows it can never be reunited with its original bless’d nails, but when the wizard attempted to burn it, and the apprentice sacrificed herself to save it, it attained *magic properties*—” He passed around a sheet of numbers, and Lucas held it against the description of his own weapon and said “Ooooooh.”

When Mike started winding up for the evening, Steve snuck out and called home, leaving a message for Billy. He returned to find Max, El, and Lucas planning a sleepover. Dustin was getting a ride home with Hopper. Will trailed after Steve as he booked it to his car, and he ducked in and locked the doors, *pretty certain* he wouldn’t be able to resist the pleading eyes twice.

When he pulled up to the grocery store, there were no other cars. Billy was just inside standing next to a heaped cart, hands in the pockets of Steve’s sweatshirt.

“Hey, you,” Steve wandered up, “—you’re ready?”

“...you didn’t even look.” Billy squinted at him, waving at the cart.

Steve looked. “...you know how to cook a lot of things. Wow. *None* of this shit has microwave instructions. Y’know last time I got invited for home cooking, they—”

“Why the hell would you *microwave* an *orange*—” Billy snatched it away.

“You’re buying fruit,” Steve observed, trying to have an opinion on the groceries.

Billy side-eyed him. “Yeah, I’m afraid you’re gonna get *scurvy*.”

Steve bumped shoulders with him, wishing they could hold hands. “Nah, I’ve got you, Hargro—”

“It’s gonna be expensive.” Billy smirked, cracking his neck.

“...not as expensive as delivery.” Steve spun on his heel around Billy, dropping both hands to the cart handle, and headed for the checkout while Billy was still spinning to face him.

He ran to catch up. “What the *fuck*, Harrington, you can’t just *buy* all this shit—put back the stuff you—”

“Enh, I trust you.” Steve got to the checkout, started unloading the cart, and frowned around for Billy, who was still back glaring at him from next to a display of canned corn.

When they pulled up to the house, Will was sitting on the doorstep, surrounded by assorted totes and three lumpy trash bags, and hugging his backpack.

“Shit, he’s probably got broken glass in his ass,” Billy scrambled out, “—Kid! Don’t sit there—”

Steve let himself fall forward against the steering wheel, then scrambled back as his face honked the horn. After a long groan, he got out, stalking over to face the guilty yet stubborn faces of two Williams. “I, uh, I got your mail.” Will held out a coupon booklet, and a box from the movie club.

“Should probably get inside.” Billy bit his lips, grabbing some bags from the ground. Steve rubbed his face, and unlocked the door. They dumped the pile just inside, joined by their groceries.

“Hi,” Will ducked his head, swallowing.

“Hullo, *Will*,” Steve raised his eyebrows, “—what’re you *doing* here?”

“So, um,” Will laughed nervously, sidling towards the kitchen. “Uh, Jonathan and Nancy are going to check out some colleges this weekend—Nancy’s dad paid for them to stay and Mom and Jonathan got enough together for a plane ticket, but they can’t afford *me*, so they’ll be gone and my mom has to work overtime and can’t check on me and, um—”

Billy leaned against the wall between the front room and the kitchen,

and Steve raised his eyebrows.

"I, uh," Will took a shaky breath, "—Hopper's taking Eleven and Mike to see her mom, and *Lucas* has *Max*, so *his* mom said no. Dustin's mom has *bronchitis*."

Billy pushed off the wall and wandered closer, prodding Steve's shoulder with two fingers.

Will sniffled. "Mom said I could stay with Dustin, or Mike, or Lucas, but if I couldn't stay somewhere she didn't want me alone, she wasn't gonna let Jonathan go with Nancy if I can't—"

"So you talked her into Steve," Billy cut him off, and Will flinched.

"Okay, okay, we just—" Steve smoothed his hair, then staggered as Billy grabbed his elbow, hauled him into the garage, and slammed the door. Steve ended up shoved against it, Billy's whispering face within kissing distance.

"I can do this," Billy licked his lips. "I *can*. I won't—I promise, Harrington, shit. Fuck." He smacked his hand against the door next to Steve's head, closing his eyes. "I can stay in the upstairs room—"

"I don't know," Steve let his head fall against the door. "Maybe I should go...stay at their house?"

Billy's head jerked up, eyes fixed on his face.

Steve shrugged. "At least go over and make him breakfast, make sure he gets home from school—"

The step creaked as Billy dropped to sit on it, taking long shaky breaths.

Steve slid down to lean against him. "...christ, Bil—Hargrove," he whispered. "I wasn't gonna make you *leave*. He's gonna be even more pissed off, isn't—" He cut off as Billy grabbed his shirt, hauling him in to a kiss with trembling hands. Billy's lips were soft, but he tasted salty, and his eyelashes were wet. Steve turned his face away. He yanked Idiot Hargrove against his shoulder, squeezing him with intent to make his bones creak.

"Fuck," Billy whispered into his neck, laughing wetly. "...shit. Sorry. I keep fucking up this 'we're done' thing."

"I do too," Steve *didn't* kiss the soft curls above Billy's ear, or kiss down his neck with his whole mouth, "—but you—I don't—" he hugged him tighter as he tried to organize his thoughts, remembering Eleven's character's caution with the little pie girl. "You were so good with Will. I wouldn't have thought of half that shit. And you were *worried* about me, you get mad they left me with the kids and the bat. Every time."

"What?" Billy slid an arm around to grab the back of Steve's collar. "You never make *sense*—"

"I—I do like you," Steve felt his face heating, and barreled through the intense feeling of idiocy. "I wouldn't—you don't have to kiss me. I *like* you."

"What," Billy laughed. "What. What are you—no you *don't*."

"I do, *actually*," Steve buried his face against Billy's neck, breathing traces of cologne, "—even if I *didn't*, I'd want you here—"

"Because I'm a person," Billy snickered into his neck. His voice was shaky, and Steve recognized nervous giggles. He slid a hand up the back of Billy's neck, and didn't kiss him.

"Yeah. You're a fucking person, I'll do anything I can to help you get out of there. But if somebody's—if I gotta have somebody staying here—" he took a deep breath, feeling Billy tense in his arms, "—I—I'm glad it's you."

"Jesus *christ*," Billy moaned into his shoulder. "Shit. *Harrington*." He smacked Steve's shoulder. "*Fuck*."

Steve opened his mouth, grinning, as a quick, soft knock came at the door to the kitchen. "—shit. Will. He's probably freaking out in there."

Billy jerked his head up, wiping his eyes. "I meant it, I can—I can manage. I know I...I don't need to make you—"

“No, fuck you,” Steve leaned to yell through the door. “It’s okay, Will, we’ll be out in a minute!” He turned back. “You threatened to *burn Max*, man, that doesn’t just—”

“But I *didn’t!*” Billy narrowed his eyes. “Even if she *had* backed up, I’d have burned my own fucking fingers off—”

“Yeah, and what if I hadn’t done what you wanted? Then what?”

“...thought maybe I’d throw something,” Billy shrugged, looking off to the side, “—break your mugs.”

“Break my *mugs*,” Steve repeated.

“They weren’t on the *list*. Don’t hurt your kids, don’t hurt you—I don’t fucking know, pretending I’d burn Max *worked*—”

“What the fuck,” Steve breathed, and Billy’s jaw worked.

“I *didn’t hurt her*. I knew you didn’t trust me, you’d react if I acted like—”

“It’s—it’s not—I can’t—”

“Here we go,” Billy snorted, wiping his eyes.

“Fuckhead. You—you held a fucking—you can’t—that’s—” Steve scrabbled at his hair, gritted his teeth, and wished Dustin had covered more in his *How To Speak To Humans* D&D class. “You don’t—you can’t—just—*point a weapon at someone* unless you wanna *use* it.”

“Pointed that bat at me earlier,” Billy raised his eyebrows.

“Yeees,” Steve sighed, letting himself slump back against the door. “I just—I was pointing with the thing in my hand. I *forgot*, all right, you didn’t—you weren’t *forgetting*—and *then*,” he clenched his fingers, and *didn’t* punch Billy in the leg, “—then I saw you go ‘oh shit, he’s mad, he’s got the bat—”

“That’s not what I sound like. At all.” Billy leaned against the door, and Steve’s shoulder, grinning.

“—and I *remembered* and I *stopped* pointing a weapon at you and I walked the fuck out—”

“And tossed it in the garage so I wouldn’t see it while we talked, yeah.” Billy’s head thumped softly against his, and Steve elbowed him.

“Augh. I’m still *pissed*, stop—fucking—*nuzzling* me.”

“I wasn’t gonna hurt Max, I had a plan,” Billy pulled away, rolling his eyes, “—I was—”

“You were losing your *shit*.” Steve rubbed his face, groaning. “You shitface. Fuckhead. *Asshole*.”

“...sorry I—lost my shit. Made you lose your shit.”

“You fucking better be,” Steve muttered into his hands. “Thought I was gonna puke.”

Billy took a deep breath, and blew it back out. “Okay, yeah, I know I’m—crazy.”

“That’s not what I—”

“But I stuck to the *deal*. I didn’t aim the damn bottle at you. I punched the *wall*—”

“Jesus, I *forgot* you hucked a *bottle* at me, you—you fucking—”

Billy raised his eyebrows, waiting, but when Steve just growled through his teeth, he continued. “—just about broke my goddamn hand, by the way, but I wasn’t—I knew what I was *doing*, I wasn’t gonna hurt *you*. Or Max.”

“I’m supposed to trust you with *Will* when you lose your shit and *punch walls*. You threw a bottle at me!”

“It missed you by a goddamn mile! It’s—just—shit.” Billy leaned his face in his hands, echoing Steve’s pose. They probably looked like matched salt and pepper shakers. “Just—try and—trust me to follow the *rules*. I did. I’ve been—I’ve been *fucking following* them.”

Steve stared at him. "...jesus, you *are* crazy."

Billy flinched. "*Fuck* you. I did what you wanted—"

"No, you're fucking nuts. You think that makes *sense*? No wonder I don't make any fucking sense to you." Steve watched Billy close his eyes, jaw clenching. "So you could—you could do—any fucked up shit—if I'm not *bleeding out* after—"

Billy took a sobbing breath against the sleeves on his forearms. "You made the fucking rules, Harrington, I followed them, I—I fucking *followed your rules*—"

"Shit *fuck*," Steve yanked him close, "—the fuck are you *crying*. You're so fucking crazy, christ. We need—we need more rules."

"More rules." Billy nodded, swallowing against his shoulder.

"Don't scare the shit out of kids. Don't scare me. Don't—" he took a deep breath, feeling like he needed a lawyer, "—if anybody's afraid, *stop* whatever the hell you're *doing*."

"Yeah."

"I fucking mean *anybody*."

"Yes—yeah. I get it. I'll be better," he laughed. It didn't sound happy. "Keep it simple, I'm stupid *and* crazy."

"Shit." Steve for once *didn't* want to kiss him. "You're...you know it's wrong. To scare people."

"Never hurt *me*," Billy muttered, and Steve crushed him to his side again.

"Fuck. Okay. You—sorry I—sorry I called you crazy. You're—you're just—treating people like your dad does."

"*I didn't fucking hurt Max*."

"No, I—I know. But you—you're scary as hell sometimes, man. You can't—Hargrove."

"I'm listening," Billy sniffled.

"You can't do that shit. You can't."

"New rule." Billy huffed a laugh.

"What?"

"When I fuck up. He shoves me against—against the shelves and says 'new rule, *Billy*, be respectful in the *hallway*. Didn't know I had to be so *goddamn specific*.'"

Steve didn't want to try and figure out his thoughts on Billy's dad, since most of them involved Wile E. Coyote dropping an anvil on his head so hard he shot out of the ground in Australia. "...you got any more rules, ba—uh, bastard?"

"What? 'S your fuckin' house, *Harrington*, I haven't got *rules*—"

"Like 'call you Hargrove.'"

"...call me Billy then, I'd get used to it."

"I thought you *liked* it, I mean. That time."

"Big difference between you breathing it in my ear when I've got my hand on my cock, and when I'm getting bawled out," Billy rolled his eyes, "—I thought you were pretending I was Nancy Wheeler—"

"She does *not* have a *mustache*, though, I don't get how you—okay, anyway, it's what your dad calls you, right, so if I don't sound, uh, horny—"

"It doesn't matter, I don't give a shit." Billy leaned into him, interlocking their fingers.

Steve squeezed back, leaning into the smell of Billy's aftershave. "I won't yell it. I could yell 'William Whatever Hargrove' again."

"William Something-or-Other Hargrove," Billy snickered. "William the Vaguely Unmemorable—"

“Oh, you’re memorable,” Steve sighed, listening to the floor creak in the kitchen. He felt bad letting Will stew, but this also seemed like the kind of conversation it’d be hard to get into again. “Okay. Rules. We don’t hurt anyone. Or scare anyone.”

“We.” Billy side-eyed him, grinning.

“Me too. I mean, I might, by accident. Okay, we don’t hurt or scare anyone *on purpose*.”

Billy slumped against him. “How d’you know whether it was on purpose, though.”

“...I...ask...you?” Steve narrowed his eyes. “Wait. What?”

“So I’m supposed to...what. Just tell you. Don’t fucking—*grab* me in the shower, if I’ve got my eyes closed.”

“Christ. Yeah. Tell me. I won’t do that anymore.”

“Fine.” Billy drew a long breath.

“*Fine*.” They both frowned at the cars for a long second, before Steve felt Billy’s shoulders shaking with giggles, and cracked up himself. “You can just tell me stuff as you think of it. Oh. Shit. *Wake me up* if you’re going out to have a smoke.”

“Jesus, yeah,” Billy snorted. “You fucking *barbarian*. Wandering around with your *club*.”

“Sorry,” Steve leaned their heads together, snickering, “—uh, if that—if I—you can just tell me to stop. Whatever I’m doing.”

“Stop it,” Billy whined, rolling his eyes, then took another slow breath, closing them. “You have to—you should—just—fucking *tell me* why you’re *pissed*.”

“What? Now?”

“Whenever.” He half stood, and Steve yanked him back down by their intertwined hands.

“Shit, okay, uh, I’m really fucking pissed at your dad. Just—what a fucking asshole. I want him disappeared by, like, *secret police*, so you and Max are safe.” Billy shook his head, smiling. “Seriously, Hargrove. Some of this shit you do, it’s not on you, it’s his—his fucking bullshit *he* did. He’s gonna keep hurting people. When I said don’t hurt anybody—”

“Yeah, I got it.” Billy rolled his eyes.

“No, shut up. If he *has* you, do whatever you need to, christ. Elbow him in the fucking face. Run him over.”

“Jesus,” Billy leaned away, “—you can stop now.”

“You don’t get hurt either, okay. He tries to fuck with you and I’ll get my fucking bat.”

“I—we should go talk to Will.” Billy scrambled back up, opening the kitchen door.

Will was perched on the arm of the couch, but he slid off, standing at attention. His gaze flicked from Steve, to Billy wiping his eyes, and down to their interlocked hands.

“He’s got allergies,” Steve blurted, and Billy started snickering again, leaning against his shoulder. “Um. Sorry, we had—other shit to talk about. We’ll—we’ll figure it out—”

“I heard you calling him a fuckhead shitface,” Will said solemnly.

“Uh...” Steve stalled out, and Billy laughed harder.

“It was pretty fair,” he told Will, dragging Steve over to the couch, “—he’s not throwing me out, or anything.”

“I’m not fucking throwing you out, christ,” Steve growled, yanking Billy down next to him, “—I will *not ever* throw you out, *jesus. God.*”

“He’s forgiving me because of our true gay love.” Billy turned his

half-lidded smirk on Will, and Steve didn't react for a long second, feeling his face heat, then grabbed Billy's shoulder and tugged him back to start dropping kisses all over his face.

"Damn straight—" Steve grinned, "—I kinda like him." Will was giggling, wide-eyed.

"Jesus *fuck* what are you *doing*—" Billy flailed against Steve's arms, trying to hide his face, before he shifted over to kicking his feet, which did nothing to dislodge him from Steve's arms.

Gotta make it look like he's struggling, even if he's not. "Huge gay love," Steve whispered across Billy's ear, and he yelped, flailing in earnest, as Steve rocked him, and started *singing*. In a Disney mouse voice. "So this is love, mm-mm, mm-mm—"

"That's not a song!" Billy's feet flailed in the air, as he cackled, pretending to bat away the continuing kisses.

Will vanished to the kitchen, then slowly popped up behind the arm of the couch like a groundhog, holding a *Polaroid camera*. "Can I take your picture?"

Billy nearly kicked himself off the couch. "Holy fuck! Harrington!"

"I'm all aglow and now I know," Steve warbled, kissing his eyelids, and Billy held bruisingly tight to his arms, laughing. His face was hot against Steve's lips, and his eyelashes still wet. "The key to our heaven is mine~" Steve kissed the end of his nose. "I *did* get you out of your tower."

"Haven't stole my fucking shoe yet, Charming," Billy mumbled, eyes fixed on Steve's lips as he used Steve's arms to pull himself upwards.

Will put his hand over his eyes. "Guys! Can I take your picture? I brought my camera!"

Steve leaned in to press kisses against Billy's eyelashes and ear, breathing in. He smelled like trees, somehow, kinda—*we could shop for cologne. It'd be fun, trying the—no, wait, I think we'd get arrested for public nudity.* "Can he take our picture?"

“The fuck would he want to,” Billy squirmed so his shirt rode up, and Steve snorted, raising his eyebrows. “Sure, go ahead.”

Will clicked five photos, and Billy started kicking again.

Steve let go, still humming, and Billy turned around to yank at Steve’s sweatshirt zipper, press warm lips to Steve’s lower belly, and *blow* as hard as he could, and Steve smacked a hand over the noise that tried to come out of his mouth.

Billy sat up, yanking his shirt straight, and ignoring Steve leaning in to keep humming princess tunes in his ear. “What’s in all the bags?”

Will bounced on his heels, flapping a Polaroid in each hand. “I brought the VHS of *Wrath of Khan*. And *Lord of the Rings*.”

Billy looked over at Steve, mouth twitching. “He brought *Lord of the Rings*.”

“Eugh, I have those.” Steve rolled his eyes, “—you *watched* them here.”

“I brought the *fancy editions*,” Will dropped to rummage in his bag, and pulled out two massive hardcovers with runes all over their metallic surfaces.

“...you brought the books,” Steve cocked his head, then squinted at Billy, who was covering a grin, “...to...read aloud?”

“Jonathan and mom and I read different characters.” He bounced on his toes, rummaging some more, and Steve took the opportunity to look at Billy and pretend to shove his finger down his throat and puke.

Billy shook his head, raising his eyebrows. “What’d you tell your mom?”

“I didn’t, not about you guys,” Will’s shoulders hunched, then looked up hopefully. “I brought my old Halloween candy! And mom got some Valentine’s candy, I didn’t, um—” he glanced between them, flushing. “I swear I didn’t tell her! I’m sorry! The box is shaped like a heart!”

"I can feed it to Steve later," Billy grinned over his shoulder, and Steve leaned into him, laughing into his neck. "Shoulda used a condom, Your Majesty," Billy whispered, "—if you didn't wanna be a *dad*."

"I'm not a dad!" Steve hissed back, trying to shield himself from Billy's sharp elbow.

"I brought my Nintendo, too." Will dug around in another bag. "And —"

"I've got an Atari." Billy leaned to look, and Steve groaned, laughing.

"...so you just had your mom drop you off." He leaned his chin against Billy's shoulder.

"I told her I wanted to pack some more things and you had to get groceries." Will lowered his head, hiding behind a polaroid.

"...lemme see it," Steve sighed, and slid his arms around Billy's shoulders, waving a hand for the photo. "Hand 'em over. Your payment."

"He can stay?" Billy leaned back into him.

"I can stay?" Will crawled over the arm of the couch, nearly into Billy's lap, grinning, and held out one picture. It was blurry. "What do I get for picture number two?"

"*All* of them, you fucking—"

"Fork 'em over, you tiny goddamn scammer—" Billy grabbed two, and Will giggled, flailing the last two out of reach.

"Shit, you're cute here." Steve poked at the top one, where Billy's grin had gone small and soft. Billy tried to stuff it in his mouth, and Steve yanked him backwards. "No! Will! Grab it!"

Will climbed over their knees, grabbing for it, and held it over his head. "Ha!"

"Little grifter's not gonna give that back." Billy leaned his head back

against Steve's neck, and Steve squeezed him tighter.

"Good, since you don't know what food is *either*, Hargrove. You don't eat *photos*—I'm not gonna put it in my *locker*, calm the fuck down."

"That's not even the cutest one," Will huddled at the other end of the couch, beaming. He slid them in his pocket, after exchanging slow nods with Steve over Billy's shoulder.

Once Billy squirmed out of his grasp, Steve followed to annoy him by actually trying to put the groceries away. Billy grabbed things out of his hands and shoved them in the fridge instead of the cupboard, or the cupboard instead of the fridge, and Will wandered in with his arms around another tied-off trash bag.

"Uh," he cleared his throat, dropping into a chair, and Billy stopped hissing at Steve about rancid oils, mealy tomatoes, and food poisoning to lean against the counter, rubbing his face.

"Whatcha got?" Steve grinned, stepping toward the fridge, but letting Billy yank the bread out of his hand and smack it on the counter.

"Um." Will untied the bag. "A lot of, uh, Christmas lights. Mom didn't want them. Anymore. I thought we could, um, make a fort?"

Steve blinked. "A—like a blanket fort?"

"What have you got? Are there more pillows somewhere?" Will's eyes narrowed. "I *really* like forts." Billy raised his eyebrows at Steve, who quirked his mouth, cocking his head in an almost-shrug.

Billy stopped Steve from dropping a bag of apples into a drawer in the fridge from waist high, and turned away to toss the bread in a cupboard. "Sounds like it's a good thing *somebody* knows what he's doing."

"Oy," Steve held his hands up, grinning as Billy shoved him out of the kitchen.

"We could tie blankets to your track lighting," Will whispered, hugging the bag, then blinked down, and dropped it on the chair. Billy shook his head.

"Okay," Steve led him to the closet with the itchy ribbon-edged blankets. "Tell me the plan, and I'll tell you what we've got."

"...we can spread these underneath," Will pursed his lips, and reached in to yank out a few pillows. "And my sleeping bag. Can we take anything from your parent's bed? Are they home?"

"Uh, there aren't really any blankets somebody isn't *using*—"

"I get to meet your parents?" Will blinked around. "Are they upstairs? I rang the doorbell—"

"Shit, no. No, there's—" Steve bit his lips. *We sleep together anyway, not like he won't notice.* "You mind if we ransack your bed, Hargrove?" Steve yelled, and Billy shouted back a stream of suggestive imagery that basically meant no.

When Steve threw the door open to the master suite, Will stopped and stared around. Billy'd unpacked from his car—probably while Steve was at D&D—and had plenty of his *own* shirts, Steve noticed, no need to keep filching Steve's. He stripped the bed, tossing the ruffled chintz pillows to Will, and bundling up the comforter to toss over the railing and down the stairs. "That enough?"

"...wait." Will frowned up. "That was *Billy's* bed—"

"Uh," Steve's brain stumbled between explaining where Billy would sleep, and suggesting Will use the name 'Hargrove' instead.

"You're both sleeping...up here?" He blinked, and his cheeks flushed. "Oh! Together! I mean, okay! Sorry! I didn't mean to—of course you wouldn't want to—"

"...you...wanted us down there?" Steve raised his eyebrows, leaning to look at Will's face.

"No, I mean. Whatever—you probably don't want to—"

Steve opened his mouth, saw Will's slumped shoulders, closed it, and leaned over the railing, shouting down. "This is supposed to be a slumber party, *cupcake-pie*, wanna...party in the pillow fort with us?"

After a short pause, Billy leaned around the stairwell. "What?"

"We're sleeping in the fort in the living room, you'll come next to me, right?"

"Word choices," Billy stared up, "—sure, yeah, whatever. Wear something slinky, Harrington." He started balling up the comforter Steve had thrown down, dodging as Steve hucked a pillow at his head.

Will had a little bounce in his step, grinning as he paced off in a weird diagonal pattern towards Steve's room for the other set of bedding. "*Dustin* said," he raised his eyebrows, "If I wanna be *the Invisible Man*, I should wear plaid in your room."

Steve drew his eyes away from the stairwell, and snorted. "Yeah, that's about right." He reached out and ruffled Will's hair, and got batted away, and a grin.

Notes for the Chapter:

There will be a couple more chapters, how many will depend on how long winded I get following my outlines--but they are OUTLINED, I know how it ends! XD We're getting there! The soap opera plots are mostly real and snagged from research about soaps! I made up the one about slipping in milk and forgetting your dog, because there were a few that did something kinda LIKE that.

Thank you so much for wandering in! Lemme know if you liked my story--I lovelovelove hearing from people! Kudos! Short comments! Long comments! Questions! Constructive criticism! Comments as extra kudos! Thanks so, so much! XD

(I try to reply to each one, but if you don't want a

response to your comment then please say "No reply please" or "Whisper" so I'll know not to reply.)

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8. 'F*ck it, why do you have to leave.'

Summary for the Chapter:

Another sweet chapter before PLOT intrudes. There's slow-dancing, some honestly awkward discussions, a princess carry, and Billy's dad makes a move. Taking the risk of throwing up a chapter count again!

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you ENDLESSLY to artlessclaybrainedflapdragon, stele3, sirsparklepants, and siriuslyrose for wading through all these chapters and commenting, Bavzel and Tbehartoo for beta-testing, and anyone reading this!

Additional warnings in the end notes.

Will placed his hand flat to the door of Steve's room, and shoved dramatically. "...wow, Dustin...Dustin was *not kidding*, it is...plaid."

Steve glanced around, and sighed, arms full of comforter. "Yeah, it's really plaid. They hired an interior decorator, I guess. Didn't ask me." He shoved more pillows at Will, called down "Hey yo, Hargrove," and dumped the other comforter over the railing after the first. Billy scrambled out of the way.

"Watch yourself, King Steve," he looked up, and exchanged a grin with Will. "The peasants might revolt when you're snoring tonight. Pitchforks and torches."

"Will the Wise, my—my court wizard, would never!" Steve grabbed the pillows in one arm, and Will around the waist—he yelped—and trotted down the stairs.

Billy was grimacing, head cocked, at Will's giggles and kicking feet. "'Will the Wise'? What's that, his—his nerd game name?"

"His *D&D character*," Steve corrected, sitting Will's feet on the floor, and avoiding his retaliatory smacking hands.

“Seriously?” Billy tossed something in the fridge with a clunk. “You coulda been ‘Zarbok the Unendearing’ or ‘Magicmaster’ or ‘Savatage’. You stuck with *William*? Who the fuck wants to be a *William*, if you could be somebody *else*.” He stuck some rattly cardboard boxes labeled ‘lasagna noodles’ in the cupboard, and Steve for once salivated over something other than his lovely ex, or the school bully. “Done.”

“Are you making *lasagna*?!” Steve gasped, but Will cut him off.

“I like being a William,” Will grabbed the movie club box Steve’d left on the counter, and rattled it. “When we built Castle Byers, Mom wanted to put a ‘Trespassers Will’ sign outside. I’m not *five*.”

He rolled his eyes, glanced between their blank faces, and sighed. “It’s from *Winnie the Pooh*. There’s an old ‘Trespassers will be prosecuted’ sign, y’know, but it’s broken off, and Piglet thinks it means his grandfather was Trespassers Will, short for Trespassers William. It’s *dumb*.”

“*Trespassers William*, huh,” Steve grabbed the movie club box, tearing at the corner, and let his smile grow at Billy.

“No,” Billy frowned back. “You’re not calling me anything to do with a *bear*—”

“It’s so *perfect*, though,” Steve yanked at the box. “Trespasser.”

“It’s Piglet,” Will stared between them. “Actually.”

“Trespassers Billiam,” Steve snickered, yanking a side of the box away, and wrinkled his nose. “...huh. Anybody wanna watch *The Smurfs and the Magic Flute*? Or hey, they reissued *Snow White*. Jesus. My mom’s hot secretary thinks I’m five.”

“Your mom?” Will perked up.

“Yeah,” Steve shrugged, trying to ignore the avid attention of various Williams. “Do we need to explain where babies come from? *Again*?”

“Are you up for that?” Billy raised his eyebrows. “You could barely handle it the first time.”

Steve raised his eyebrows, feeling his cheeks heat, and corrected himself. "...does *Hargrove* need to explain where babies come from again?"

Billy smirked, and Will giggled, but wasn't derailed. "No, I—just—where is she?" Will asked, as Billy flailed his arms, then pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Oh, uh. She's roommates with her really...hot...secretary—" he narrowed his eyes, then blinked. "Wait, my—my *mom's gay*. That's definitely weird." Billy stalked over and slid an arm around him, nearly knocking him over, and laughing into his shoulder. "Uhhh, she's in Boston, usually? She, um, she travels a lot."

"Why doesn't she—" Will began, and Steve felt his jaw clench. The kid must have noticed, because he stopped.

"You got a dad?" Billy leaned his chin on Steve's shoulder.

"He's got his *own* secretary," Steve let himself lean back into him, "...I guess."

Billy squeezed him. "Where?"

"Uh, guys—"

"You live here *alone*." Will's eyes were huge. "You're all by yourself. *That's* why Billy can stay."

Steve sighed, squeezing the bridge of his nose. "Okay, look, I'm still seventeen—"

"We'll keep it quiet." Billy shifted against him, glancing around. "Shit, Harrington, how long you been living on TV dinners?"

"Hey, I get Kentucky Fried Chicken, sometimes." Steve squirmed, and Billy stepped back.

"...the hell'd you do before you could drive." Billy stepped away, digging a beer out of the fridge.

Steve snorted, cracking his neck. "I took the *bus*? I had a—" he

waved his hand hip-high. “Little kid bike, y’know, what the hell d’you think.”

“How—how old were—” Will’s eyes just kept getting wider, and Steve cut him off, swallowing around a raw feeling in his throat.

“Not everybody’s got your mom, Will.” He grabbed a chair in one hand, the bag of Christmas lights in the other, tossing them over his shoulder, and strode into the front room. “Hoy. Buttfaces. How do we start. Let’s make this fort.”

Will followed him out, Billy bringing up the rear with the sound of a crushed beer can tossed into the sink. As Will dug clothespins out of one of his totes, Billy slid an arm around Steve, leaning in. “So. How hot is your mom’s secretary,” he whispered, and Steve’s tight shoulders dropped as he barked a laugh.

“She’s almost as old as my *mom*.” He grinned, pulling the chair over and climbing on to reach the ceiling.

“Just my type, you should give me her number.” Billy grabbed his hand and gave him a sloppy knuckle kiss as he walked by, and Steve stepped too far to the side. The chair tottered, then slowly began to tip—like the *chair* got a run-by smooching, Steve thought, rolling his eyes—and he had to shift his feet to balance it on two legs as he stepped down to the side rung, then to the floor as the chair thudded softly on its side behind him.

He glanced around, head ducked, feeling like a silent movie comedian. Both Williams were pink-cheeked and watching. “Oh, fuck off.” He put one foot on the rung of the chair to get it arcing upright as he stepped on the edge with the other, and Billy turned away, clearing his throat.

“Did you *practice* that?” Will asked, wide-eyed, as the chair settled back on four legs, and Steve cocked his head.

“...falling...off a chair? Why...why would I practice that.”

“It looks cool.” Will watched as Steve rolled his eyes, grabbing the back of the chair and rocking it back to two legs while he balanced

with one foot on the seat, one on the side rung. Will clapped—and slid a glance at Billy. “*Billy* really likes it.”

“Shut up, Will,” Billy stomped off to grab a blanket.

“Of course my *trespasser* likes watching me stumble around—” Steve rolled his eyes, and Will shook his head, opening his mouth, then sighed.

“...you wouldn’t *fuck off* from under my *window*, shithead,” Billy threw a pillow at his head, and Steve took the hit and caught it, grinning over. “The hell was I supposed to—”

“Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your mullet,” Steve snickered, and Billy grabbed pillows in both hands and launched an attack. Will grabbed a *seat cushion* off the couch, forgetting the effect the size of it would have on his reflexes, and ran around waving it at both of them and missing entirely.

They circled the front room in an infinite loop, supplying each other with thrown pillows, stances wide like they were playing one-on-one basketball. Billy finally smacked Steve sprawling over the arm of the couch and knelt on the floor next to him, panting. “You *wanted* me here. You—you fucking—you came and *got me*, don’t—”

Steve flailed an arm out, and grappled his shoulders close, talking into his curls. “Yeah. Yeah, you trespassed a few too many times, asshole. Keeping you.”

“What.” Billy buried his face against Steve’s side. “You’re not *keeping* me, you’re—you’re releasing me with one of those radio collars. Throw me in a truck, drop me in the mountains, hope to fucking god I don’t find my way back.”

Leaning his head back, Steve watched Will edge out of the room, pointing upstairs, and waved with his free hand. His other hand teased at the hairspray in Billy’s curls. “What,” he had to clear his throat a couple of times to laugh. “You—you saying you’re—domesticated. Tame. You want to—”

“Fuck you,” Billy yanked away, standing up. “Saying I’ll probably

knock over your trash cans every night after work.”

“You can always *ring the doorbell*—” Steve swung his legs to the floor to reach for him, and Will walked back in.

“I got the sheets,” he said, breathless. “They aren’t as heavy, it’s easier to tie them—” He glanced between Steve and Billy, blushing.

Billy accepted one, stepping up on the chair, frowned at it under his feet, and then squinted at Steve.

“What,” Steve mouthed, and Billy stuck out his tongue and looked away, shaking his head. He braced himself, feet as wide as they’d go on the chair, before stretching up to tie the corner of the sheet around the track lighting.

Steve looked away from Billy’s toned stomach where his shirt rode up, cleared his throat, and started gathering other tall things—the metal tubing hat rack from the garage, and while he was there, bungee cords. They shortly had a canopy wide and tall enough for—he stopped, glancing around for Billy, who was crouched with Will trying to untangle the Christmas lights.

Steve stepped over, bent in a low bow, and kissed his stubbled cheek, as Will giggled. “May I have this dance?”

Billy turned a pink-cheeked glower on him, and Steve crouched, holding out his hand.

“What are we waltzing to, your highness,” Billy thumped his shoulder into Steve’s, and Steve threw an arm around him to keep his balance.

“We should get the lights up first,” Will tugged harder at his strand, face bright red.

“I could put on a *princess cartoon*—” Steve began in sing-song, straight-faced, and Billy shoved him over, scrambling to his feet and stomping off to the garage, yelling back through the door.

“You’re a sick fucker, Harrington! You’re *diseased in the head!*”

Steve shot a grin at Will, who was leaning on the floor on one hand, cackling into the other.

When Billy returned, carrying a small suitcase and an armload of cassettes to dump in front of the stereo, Steve and Will were arranging the lights. They zigzagged them between the hat rack and the chair supporting the other back corner, which lit most of the fort, and then Steve climbed back up and started twining them along its ceiling. Will abandoned him to look through the cassettes.

“Do you have any Led Zeppelin?”

Billy grinned at him, leaning in to unclasp the little suitcase, and Steve finished the fifth *and last* strand to look over and see Will and Billy’s heads together, discussing music. He switched off the overhead lights—forcing them to huddle closer to the stereo light—and crossed his arms, waiting for them to look up and see his fairy lights.

Billy smacked a cassette in, and crossed his arms at Will, who held up his fists, giggling. “Next one’s *my* turn.” Billy rolled his eyes, and Steve shook his head, grinning, and moved the chair he’d used to stand on out of their blanket fort. He dropped down to lean between them—and get an unasked-for lecture on, of all things, *metal bands who liked Lord of the Rings*. When Will paused to cover a yawn, Steve opened his mouth to rescue Billy, who promptly ejected the Led Zeppelin Will’d been explaining. Billy popped in a tape labeled “Cirith Ungol,” which sounded, to Steve’s ears, like screaming.

Will crawled across Steve’s lap to get to the case in fascination. “That’s a pass on the way to Mordor—well, and the orc stronghold *in* the pass—”

“What,” Steve groaned.

“In the Lord of the Rings! You’ve seen the *movies*, Steve—” Steve leaned against Billy’s shoulder, succumbing to his fate, as the two nerds pawed through the cassettes, talking about orcs and goblins. Billy said something about the *Dark Tongue*, and Steve snickered into his shoulder.

"But you've never *read* it," Will yawned again, slumping between them, his shoulder digging into Steve's chest, his head against Billy's neck.

"Tried the Two Towers once, couldn't figure out what the fuck was going on," Billy grinned over his head at Steve, and switched out the tape for a more comprehensible one labeled *Attacker: Battle at Helm's Deep*.

"You can't start *there*," Will took that case too, blinking slowly at the lyrics *Vandalizing the countryside/Goblins march in fearless pride*. "I want to hear *all* of them," he tipped himself forward to inspect the cassette case, covering another voluminous yawn. "And then we can—we can start the book."

"Yeah, no," Steve leaned sideways to watch him rubbing his face. "We can do that in the morning."

Will squinted at him, unsubtly sliding another cassette around his body to Billy, who blinked wide eyes at Steve before clicking it in the player.

Steve groaned as another guitar riff reverberated around the room. "I'm gonna set it up so we can sleep," he jerked his thumb towards the fort, and Billy scrambled up with him, displacing Will onto the floor. Will didn't seem to notice.

Steve started laying out the comforters, and arranging pillows, eventually realizing Billy had sat back on his heels, frowning around.

"Hey, Harrington," he licked his teeth, grinning. "Looks like a sex cave."

Steve covered a loud snort. "Shut up."

"I think we could fit the king-size off that bed upstairs in here."

Steve surveyed the grounds with new eyes, eyebrows raised as he nodded. "I think you're right." He stepped over and hauled Hargrove to his feet, pulling him close for a peck on the mouth, and holding him with their heads together. Billy let his eyes close for a second, then jerked back, shooting a glance at Will, who was staring

at the stereo, bouncing a little in place.

“He’s not even looking,” Billy hissed, and Steve bit his lips, stepping back. Billy ran his fingers through his hair, staring at Steve, then turned on his heel and stomped away towards the stairs. The electric guitar cut out as Steve followed.

When Steve walked in Billy’s room, he was lying on his back on the bare mattress, his curls a little wild where he’d run his hands through them. “...sorry?” Steve tried.

“Doesn’t matter,” Billy shoved himself upright, yanking his t-shirt down. “Kiss me all you like, you’re the one who fucking—who doesn’t want—”

“Wait, it’s not that I—”

“Look, *fuck you*,” Billy stalked up and shoved him back. “Get the other end of this *fucking* mattress.”

Steve ducked his head, and did. As they took mincing steps on the multi-point turn out the doorway and into the bannister, familiar notes on a *familiar harmonica* floated up the stairs, and Steve cracked up, dropping the mattress to lean against the bannister. “*William Whatever Hargrove*,” he gasped, pushing the mattress just enough to feel it thud into Billy, “You listen to the *Beatles*?”

“...it was my mom’s,” Billy growled back, and Steve winced, picking his end of the mattress up again.

“Shit, sorry...let’s just tip it over the bannister, we won’t make this turn. We can balance it and then catch it, yeah?”

Billy shrugged, but helped him balance it, and Steve squeezed his shoulder as he slid around him to stand on the stairs.

“Serve you right if I drop it.” Billy’s voice was hoarse. “Sled down over your corpse.”

“I think it’s a specific crime if you kill somebody you’re married to,” Steve bounced on his toes to catch the mattress as Billy flipped it towards him.

“Shut up,” Billy sighed.

“Is it maricide?” Steve mused. “Maritime? No, matricide?”

“You aren’t my *mother*,” Billy shoved the mattress, and Steve staggered down the bottom steps. “And *holding hands at the IHOP* doesn’t make us *married*.”

“Think it does, we had witnesses—” Steve jogged backwards to the front door so Billy could get out of the stairwell, and they slid the mattress on its side into the front room. Billy left Steve holding the mattress, then stopped, beckoning Steve over with raised eyebrows.

The mattress thumped as Steve pushed it against the wall, sidling over slide an arm around Billy, and look at Will asleep, curled up in Steve’s plaid comforter. His face was half under the entertainment system, hugging an armload of cassettes so one was partly in his mouth.

Billy swore under his breath, and went to yank the blankets out of the fort and clear the floor. Steve pulled some out, and piled them up, but when the next song started, Billy just stood in the center of the fort. He had his fist pressed against his mouth, and his eyes closed tightly, and Steve dropped the pillow he was holding to go stand in front of him.

“Hey,” he lifted his hands, remembered Billy’s earlier flailing, and lowered them. “Do you—you okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m good—” He took a deep, shaky breath. “The fuck are you—”

“Want me to turn it off?”

“Fuck.” Billy rubbed his face. “It’s—whatever. Doesn’t matter. What’re you staring at, straight boy, aren’t you afraid I’ll try and slow dance?”

“Hey, I suggested it,” Steve grinned, twiddling his fingers as he reached out with both hands and grabbed Billy’s, then leaned close to whisper in his ear. “Are we doing this or aren’t we?”

Billy groaned, leaning his face in Steve's neck, but swayed along with *If I fell in love with you/would you promise to be true/and help me understand?* "I'm gonna get hard, and you're not," he mumbled into the skin under Steve's ear, and Steve snorted.

"Don't count on it."

"If I give my heart to you," Billy sang along, his breath warm against Steve's ear, *"I must be sure/from the very start that you/would love me more than her—"*

Steve huffed a laugh into his curls, tucking his fingers, twined with Billy's, in the back pockets of Billy's jeans. "I've asked you out, asshole. You threatened to kill me."

"So I hope you see that I/would love to love you," Billy pressed against him chest to hips, singing against his collarbone. Steve could feel his grin. *"And that she will cry/when she learns we are two—"*

"Jesus, I didn't realize this song was so pissed at my ex," Steve dug his nails in the denim covering Billy's butt, and Billy jerked closer, laughing, as the song switched to *And I love her*. He stumbled, and Steve slowed, pulling a hand free so Billy's weren't pinned awkwardly behind his back when he had Sudden Emotions.

He listened to Billy's slow breaths, running a hand up his spine. "...that's not my sweatshirt," he lifted his head to squint at it. "Whose sweatshirt is that?"

Billy yanked his other hand free and slung both arms around Steve's neck, laughing helplessly into his shoulder. "I have my *own clothes*, Harrington."

Steve felt himself flushing. "How was I supposed to know you owned shirts?" he whispered back. "You don't *fucking wear* them."

"I do *fucking wear* them," Billy lifted his head, breathing less than an inch from Steve's mouth. He smelled like beer, and chapstick, and toothpaste, and his eyes made Steve feel like a swimming pool was laughing at him. "I've been wearing *yours*, just 'cause you keep...shoving me into them." He licked his lips.

“...like...you’re still—days *later*,” Steve stumbled over his words, sliding his hand up to curve it around Billy’s jaw, and feel his face get warmer with every second they swayed to *A love like ours/Could never die/As long as I/Have you near me*. His mouth and throat had gone dry somehow, and he swallowed, and didn’t slide his other hand through Billy’s curls. “But—good—good to know you, y’know, you know how to—dress yourself. When—once you—get back to California.”

Billy stalled out, suddenly just a cement traffic barrier Steve was trying to dance with. “What.”

“I mean. I won’t—it’s not like—you’ll have to zip up your own sweatshirts,” Steve cleared his throat, swallowing again. “Good. Good thing it’s warm there.”

“California,” Billy repeated. He nodded, grinning, and yanked his arms back, shoving away from Steve’s shoulder. “Right. You’re giving me *money* to get the *hell* out of your *fucking life*. How could I forget *that*.”

“...you *wanted* a job, to leave town,” Steve argued, staggering back. “You *said* you—”

“Yeah. Thanks. That’s great, *Harrington*.” Billy laughed, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes. “I thought that was some of the shit you didn’t mean. How long’s *that* gonna take.”

It was probably good, Steve reflected, how fast Billy could switch channels. He’d *known* Billy only wanted to get back to California, but it kinda stung, having Billy treat him like hot coals the second he remembered. “A-a week, maybe two? I called the bank, but I’m—I’m a minor, so—”

“What’s going on?” The comforter rose with Will’s wide eyes underneath it, his face red where he’d hugged the cassettes, and Steve tried not to whine.

“My sweet boyfriend here,” Billy told him, reaching out and squeezing Steve’s shoulder right at the bone. Steve’s t-shirt was no protection from the grip of his blunt nails. “—he’s letting me have

some money to move *home to California*. I—I can see all my *friends*! I bet my *mom* really misses me, *too*, right, *honey*?”

“Your mom lives in California?” Will’s eyes widened. “Wow, that *sucks*. That—that is so *goddamned* far.” He enunciated the swear carefully, and Steve resisted a snort. “Unless your mom tries to keep you all—all wrapped up in—in bubble wrap, like mine does, sometimes I—I mean—”

“She does not do *that*, no,” Billy’s eyes were fixed on Steve’s.

Will’s eyes were flicking between them. “You—you must be excited, to see her, but...what about you and...” He fixed wide, shining eyes on Steve, who winced, both from guilt and Billy’s bruisingly-tight hold on his shoulder.

“Oh, of course my *beloved* will *visit*,” Billy yanked his hand away to fold his arms around himself. He bared his teeth in a grin at Steve, and Steve swallowed.

“I would if you *wanted* me to,” he muttered, rubbing his shoulder, and Billy narrowed his eyes at him.

“Of course you’ll visit,” Will stumbled out of his nest and hopped over on one leg, trying to disentangle himself from the comforter. “Right?”

“Ye-yeah, of course,” Steve swallowed, his throat feeling like a dry riverbed. “Maybe he’ll come back for the fair this summer. Or—or I could—take you and El and, uh,” he risked a glance at Billy, who’d stalked over to haul the mattress away from the wall and push it towards the fort. “We could—road trip. Disneyland.” He dodged out of the fort as Billy rammed the mattress at him.

“Oh!” Will blinked. “That’s a good idea, the mattress, at home we don’t *have* a bed that big. You know what, we could use the couch cushions as walls. Do—do you live near Disneyland?” He helped Billy lower the mattress.

“Don’t fucking live *anywhere*,” Billy clambered back out, “—apparently. I need a—a fucking—smoke.” He grabbed Will’s head

with both hands and messed up his hair, and Will giggled, batting at him, and then spent a few seconds trying to get it back out of his face as Billy slammed out the door to the deck.

“Shit,” Steve watched him stomp down the steps. “Shit, shit shit. I—I gotta go—I think I said something—I think he thinks I want him out —”

“Okay,” Will bit his lips.

“I really—I *like* him,” Steve groaned, scrabbling at his hair, and wishing it wasn’t true.

“I know.” Will shrugged, grabbing the pile of sheets.

“Shit.” Steve reached to slap the pool lights on on the way out the door, then braced himself as the cold frosted down his windpipe on the first breath. He coughed, ducking his face into his collar. “*Shit*, shit, god *damn* it.”

“Fuck off, Harrington,” Billy’s voice sounded thick.

Steve followed it around to the snowy chairs around the pool, and tipped the snow out of the closet. “I don’t—I’m not trying to—I like you here.” He took a deep breath, dropping into the chair, and frowning over to see Billy’s suspicious eyes barely visible between his hair and his attempt to turtle into the sweatshirt.

“Yeah, I know you’re *lonely*, Harrington, shit.” Billy raised his chin just enough to take a drag on his cigarette. “Course you don’t *mind* me. You’re too afraid you’re *crazy* to date. Your old friends suck *balls*. Your *new* best friend’s a fucking—*toddler*. You’re so tired of this empty house you’re watching princess movies. Probably nothing sounds better than some *fag* hanging around just—*leaning into you* like you’re a fucking *flame*.”

“Shit, no—” Steve got out of his chair, and Billy held up a hand.

“Don’t *fucking* touch me. You don’t—you don’t want *all* of this pile of —of—*screw you*.” he took another shaky drag on his his cigarette, and blew a ring. “Don’t fucking touch me if you won’t kiss me, or let me just—*christ*.”

“Sorry,” Steve swallowed. “It’s not that I—”

“It’s okay around Will,” Billy turned away as much as he could, squirming with his legs curled in the chair. “I know you aren’t actually gonna let me go any further with that. But if you aren’t—if I’m your fucking *pound puppy*, stop fucking *romancing* me, it’s—”

“Sorry,” Steve shivered, rubbing his arms. “You’re—you’re so—” He tried to encapsulate the frustration of never knowing how to form his vague feelings into words, to someone who could apparently do it exhausted and shivering.

“What, *Steve*,” Billy smiled up. “Am I being too *complicated*? Or is that too difficult a word for you?”

Steve stopped, and considered, feeling a bit like he’d been asked to stand in his own grave and handed a shovel. Or maybe smacked with it. “Sorry. I—I’ll go inside now.” Before he turned, he unzipped his sweatshirt, tucked it around Billy—who froze, mid-drag on his cigarette—and shoved his hands in his pockets to tromp back in the house.

He’d almost made it to the door when Billy let out a hacking cough and roared “*Harrington!* Take your *fucking sweatshirt* back—I just *fucking said*—”

When he leaned into the fort, Will was piling up the comforters. He frowned up. “We need a name. And a sign...where’s Billy?”

“I don’t think he’s gonna hear anything I say right now,” Steve shrugged, kicking the pile of pillows closer to the fort, and tossing them singly to Will, “—I mean I dunno what *to* say, but I think if I stumble around with a bunch of bullshit right now, he’ll—” he frowned, suddenly annoyed. “I bet he’d shove me in the pool. There’s not even *water* in it.”

“Why’s he mad?” Will brushed his hands together theatrically, waving around their colorfully lit blanket cave. “Lemme get my paper and markers—”

“Looks really comfy,” Steve pushed Will over backwards into the pillows, and flopped next to him, ducking away from a flailing arm. He grabbed an armful of fluffiness, and buried his face, until he felt tiny sharp fingers prodding his side.

“Steve,” Will whispered. “Why’s Billy mad?”

After a long fight against the impulse to smother himself with the pillow, Steve lifted his head. “...I don’t...” He groaned, kicking his feet. “I mean. I *kinda* know, like, he’s mad that I...he thinks...okay,” he folded his arms on a pillow, propping himself up to see Will’s intent face, “—Dad Hargrove is such a fucking—he’s a shithead, okay, he’s just—he’s completely —*rargh*.” He buried his face in his arms again.

“Yeah,” Will waited.

“So Billy keeps—he doesn’t—he doesn’t think he’s...like-*able*, y’know, like—nobody could ever *like Billy Hargrove*, to Billy, so—”

“He doesn’t believe you?” Will sat up, crossing his legs, the better to lean in.

Steve sighed, rolling onto his back. “I don’t—it’s like it *changes*, he thinks I really want *Nancy*, and I’m lying, and then he thinks I don’t want him at *all*, but right after *that* he thinks I want him to—” he stopped with his mouth hanging open, his cheeks heating like burners as he realized he’d almost mentioned *blow jobs* to *Will Byers*. After a long pause, about the point Steve was thinking he really did need to breathe, at least, Will prodded him again.

“He thinks you like him *sometimes*?” Will squinted.

“Whenever I’m *mad*,” Steve said carefully, “—he thinks I want him to do ...*stuff*, and I don’t know if he even wants to *do* the—the *stuff*.”

Will squinted harder, cocking his head. “What kinda—*oh*.” He cleared his throat, biting his lips. “*Stuff*. Uh.”

“I don’t wanna do—*stuff*—if he doesn’t even usually—*ugh*.” Steve pulled the pillow over his face again.

“Why...would he...I mean, don’t you believe he wants to—to do—*stuff*?” Will squeaked the last word, hands steeped to hide some of his face.

“Uuuurgh,” Steve lifted his head. “He just wants me less...*mad*. Like. Like if your mom was upset already, and you took the trash out, you’d be doing it, like—”

“So she wouldn’t cry,” Will nodded, huge-eyed. “Doing—*stuff*—is like *that*?”

“I don’t know!” Steve flailed. “Maybe! For Billy Hargrove!”

Will tottered to his feet, staggering across the thick uneven layers of comforter and pillows, and grabbed his backpack. “Hrm,” he mumbled into it. “What are you gonna do?”

“I don’t know.” Steve watched him pull out construction paper and markers. “I don’t know what he *wants*. I think I do, but then I keep fucking up.”

“You can’t just ask him? Or—oh, is it like—” Will gripped his markers, frowning down. “He just—tries to make *you* happy?”

“Yeah,” Steve sighed. “Or he tries to make me mad? He’s always just—he does shit to piss me off, he was yelling at me for being dumb out there. I’m not *stupid*, he’s just *crazy*.”

Will nodded slowly. “...what should we name the fort?”

Steve army-crawled over to look at the tapes. “Uh, wasn’t this a place?” He waved *Cirith Ungol* at Will, who wrinkled his nose.

“A *bad* place. What about—”

“Trespassers Billiam,” Steve pointed, grinning. “All trespassers with that name I toss in here.”

Will made a face, then grinned. “You’re gonna make him mad again.”

“Uuuurgh.” Steve rolled to bury his face again.

“Can’t you just...say you like him...even if he doesn’t do, um, *things*?”

“He’s leaving anyway,” Steve sighed. “He thinks his mom hates him, but I bet his dad like—got full custody by *lying* about her, or she’s hiding from him, or—I dunno. It’ll work out. He’s...he’s got somewhere to *fucking be*.” He punched the pillow, twice, then grabbed it to cover his face.

“...that’s...*good*, though, right?” Will wouldn’t stop *talking*, and Steve swallowed a couple times, before raising his head to press his thumb against the bridge of his nose.

“Yeah. It’s great. Of course. He doesn’t need all *this*, he’s got somewhere to go. If I had the money to gi-lend him, he’d be halfway there now. Cloud of—cloud of fucking dust.”

“...you...you could call him. A lot. And, uh, and visit.” The mattress bounced as he shifted closer, and Steve forced out a laugh, sitting up.

“Sorry. Sorry. You came for a sleepover, and I’m not any fun.”

“I’m having fun,” Will grimaced, “—not—not while you’re fighting, but. This is fun. You *told* me it was a bad time.”

Steve snorted, combing the hair out of his face with his fingers where the pillow-hugging had messed it up. He crawled to the side to fix the blankets.

“You—you know,” Will watched him with wide, determined eyes, and Steve leaned away, “Um, you don’t have to be fun. Not all the time. Your friends will still like you if you aren’t fun.”

Steve almost laughed in his face, but reached over to mess his hair up again instead.

“I *mean* it!” Will smacked at his hands. “Real friends won’t—”

Steve swallowed back another laugh, and tossed a pillow at him. “I’m glad you’ve got good friends, Will.”

“You have lots of friends! You’ve got Billy, and Dustin, and—and

Nancy—”

I shouldn't take satisfaction in him running aground. Steve let his smile widen. “I’ve got friends when they *need something*, okay? I get the call when something dangerous is happening, or a kid needs someplace to go—” he waved around at Trespassers Billiam.

“Wait,” Will held up his hands, “—no, that’s not—”

“—and I thought *he* needed me, because—I mean, fuck it, anyway, he *doesn't*—shit, I’m sorry, you don’t need to hear this. Fuck.”

“Steve!” Will smacked him in the face with a pillow, tears running down his cheeks.

“Shit.” Steve took a deep breath. “Shit, Will, I’m sorry, I don’t care if you come over. I didn’t mean that.”

Will smacked him again, and *again*, sitting on his chest to aim properly, until Steve was curled up laughing, arms around his head. “Take all that back, you do *too* have friends!” He smacked at Steve’s protective arms again.

“Sure, kid,” he snickered, and got smacked again.

“I-am-your-friend,” Will punctuated every word with another whack of the pillow. “*Dustin-is-your-friend.*” He panted, wiping his face on his sleeve. “I—I think Billy really—really *likes* you. He got those photos away from me and slid them under the cassettes in his carrier case. I wasn’t supposed to tell you.”

“...blackmail?” Steve suggested, and got walloped a few more times, before Will flopped forward over the pillow, groaning.

“I’m tired and you’re dumb.” He reached down and pinched Steve’s cheeks, hard, and Steve rolled to dump him off.

“I thought a *real* friend didn’t mind if I wasn’t fun.”

“Screw you,” Will mumbled, throwing the pillow at him, before clambering back upright, pointing at Steve’s face. “You said it! I’m a real friend!”

“Feel better?” Steve grinned over, and got another pillow to the face.

“I do *now*, yeah,” he sighed contentedly up at the Christmas lights. “Also, I’m telling.”

“What?”

“I’m telling *Dustin*, and *Nancy*, and—and your *boyfriend*, and Ms. *Williams*—”

“Holy god, please don’t,” Steve breathed. “*Please* don’t tell my ex I was whining about her not liking me enough.”

“Mmmm.” Will narrowed his eyes, and smacked him with another pillow. “Okay, fine. But I’m gonna *hint* real hard.”

“Christ.” Steve whacked him back with the pillow. He wrinkled his nose. “Leave it be, they’ll think I’m *clingy*.”

“Nancy already knows that,” Will rolled his eyes, and Steve felt his throat click.

He rubbed his face, standing. “Right. Right. She knows I’m—clingy. She *said* that?”

“Basically,” Will shrugged, and Steve nodded, taking a deep breath and blowing his cheeks out.

“Great. That’s—that’s really great. Perfect. Y’know the only reason *Billy* likes me is I think I’m the first person who didn’t treat him like *shit*—”

“What?!” Will squeaked, but Steve cut him off, scrambling over the piles of bedding.

“Christ *fucking hell*, did he *freeze* out there?” He loped to the wall to peer through the window. “...should I go *get* him?”

“...I could? Do you want me to?”

“*You*,” Steve pointed, “—should be brushing your teeth and putting on—sleeping—things. I’m gonna—” he pointed outside, took a deep

breath, and blew it through his cheeks. "...tell my dickhead boyfriend he's great and I don't want him to freeze to death."

Will snickered. "Maybe he doesn't believe you because you sound so *romantic*."

"Okay, you're like nine, so fuck off," Steve flicked his head, then ignored his detailed rebuttal, math excuses, and flung pillows.

Will was still yelling "I'm *not nine!* And I'm *still telling!*" as Steve set his shoulders, grabbed the afghan Will had left on the couch, and huddled into it to brave the outdoors again.

When he crept ineffectively around the corner of the house, the crunching of refrozen snow reverberating clear to the neighbors, Billy was still curled up in the plastic lawnchair. All of him except his hair and eyes was covered by Steve's sweatshirt. The whole *chair* was shaking.

"Hey, dickhead," Steve tried, hanging back a few feet. "Maybe come inside before you freeze solid?"

Billy laughed. It sounded wet. "Th-think I'm-m already—"

"Yeah, okay," Steve dropped the afghan over him, sliding one arm under his knees, and one around his shoulders. Billy's clothes were cold, and stiff to the touch, like a tarp.

"D-don't you f-fucking *d-dare*—"

"Come on." Steve braced himself, and lifted with his knees, and Billy grabbed for him with both arms, stuttering profanity. "Just taking you—inside—*oof*—jesus, maybe—go a little—easier on the bicep curls." All curled up, he was heavy as hell, but he still seemed *smaller*, with his head tucked under Steve's chin, and his boots in the air.

"Stop—stop this p-prince shit, p-put me down-n," Billy shivered hard against him, laughing.

"I could throw you over my shoulder like a fireman," Steve grinned, hoping Will was in the front room to open the door. "But I'm kinda afraid you'd crack in half—"

"You d-drop me," Billy laughed against his neck, "—and I will c-crack *you* in half—y-you will fucking *d-die*, I will *f-fucking murd-der* you—"

Steve went slow, both unworried and undoubting that he would, in fact, die. *And fair enough, if I drop him on his spine down the stairs in the snow.* "I'd do it, y'know. Date you. I think you—do you—think I'm shitting you, when I say I'd take you out? 'Cause I *would*, I'd fucking do it."

"...fucking would n-not," Billy muttered. His fingers clenched in Steve's shirt so tight it pinched.

Steve held him tighter, pretending to himself it was so he could see the stairs. "I mean, if you weren't leaving."

"*Ffuck* you," Billy shuddered against his shoulder, in what could have been laughter, or cold.

"I *would*! We could—we could do the drive-in movie thing!" Steve took a few deep breaths after climbing the stairs, and gave the door a gentle kick.

"S-sit at the theater, r-room between us for *Jesus*," Billy huffed.

"Theaters are *dark*, dipshit," Steve squinted through the door, trying to see Will in the dim front room. "You can get *up to shit* in the back of a theater—" He wagged his eyebrows, and Billy jerked in his arms.

"...think I did fr-f *-fuck*. F-freeze solid," he muttered. "C-can't even kick you. 'N my lips 're numb."

"I'd bring you forget-me-nots. *Frosty*."

"D-don't want any ff-fucking *flowers*," Billy laughed hoarsely. His shivering had slowed, bundled against Steve, but Steve was slowly going numb.

He kicked the door again, trying not to hum ‘Frosty the dickhead’. “Might just eat all the fancy chocolates and stare at you, then, like ‘Look at me, eating all the chocolate, you actual fucking prick.’”

“What the *f-fuck*,” Billy burst out laughing, and rolled his head against Steve’s shoulder. Despite his flush, his face was cold even through Steve’s t-shirt, but Steve remembered, and *didn’t* pull him closer, or bury his face in the soft curls. “You’re g-gonna *stare* at me and s-slowly eat things? Y-you’re *sure* you don’t wanna b-blow job?”

Steve started cackling against the side of the door, looked down to see Billy wagging his tongue around, and lost it again. “Shit. Jesus. Okay. Stop that, Will’s coming. How’re you doin’, asshole?”

Billy raised his eyebrows. “D-dinner’s great, ma’am, c-could we get some more breadsticks—”

“Oh, shut up.”

Will ran to the door, and beamed at them as Steve walked by—for all Billy’s griping, he didn’t try to get Steve to drop him. When Steve *did* set him on his feet, he staggered, started to tilt toward him again, and jerked back, stumbling off through the kitchen like an afghan-swathed grandmother zombie.

“...we better get ready too,” Steve said, grinning at Will.

“...did you, uh, did you...fix him?”

“...I don’t think I can...fix it that fast, but,” Steve shook his arms out, wincing. “God, he’s like carrying a—like a *stone statue*, I need a crane or something—we’ll be right back down.”

Will yawned, grinning.

Billy was glaring up the stairs, leaning against the wall, and Steve slid an arm around him slow enough for him to pull away. He didn’t. He was quiet while Steve hauled him up the stairs, and quiet when Steve tipped him onto the lid of the toilet and turned away to run the hot water. The afghan flew by as Steve turned back, but Billy’s hands were shaking too hard to disentangle himself from Steve’s sweatshirt, let alone unzip his own. He was still unnervingly passive as Steve

pushed his hands aside and leaned in to unwrap him, and tug the undershirt over his head.

“What the hell was that?” Steve asked, dropping to sit in front of him and yank on his boots. “You were just gonna sit out there?”

“Just th-thinking. Thought I might g-go home.” Billy rubbed his hands together, and up his arms, keeping his gaze on the shower curtain. “I mean it’s n-not like I haven’t run off before—”

“What, *no*,” Steve grabbed his hand, and Billy yanked it back, thunking his elbow against the toilet.

He grinned down. “Whatcha g-gonna do, Ha-Harrington, lock me in the garage?”

“No! No, why would—don’t—” Steve yanked at his other boot. “Come on, dickface, your lips are blue. At least get in the *shower*.”

Billy pushed himself upright, and Steve kept his eyes on Billy’s holey athletic socks at the sound of his jean zipper. “F-figure I’d be out of your h-hair sooner.”

“I want you *in my hair*, *Hargrove*—” Steve growled, smacking Billy’s leg, and ignoring Billy squirming around trying to get *out* of his extremely fitted jeans. He clapped his hand over his eyes. “What d’you want from your room? To wear?”

“...whatever, Ha-harrington,” Billy slurred, shivering, and Steve heard the shower stall open, and close.

He slid out to get sweatpants, and change, then wandered back in—eyes on the floor—to sit on the toilet, and brush his teeth. He crossed his legs, trying to get the words *everybody else used* to play well together in his head. “Hargrove.”

“Yep,” came Billy’s voice, over the sound of a thorough soaping.

“I don’t—” Steve leaned his elbows on his knees, and frowned at the suds on his toothbrush. “I know I—I say stupid shit. But—” he stuck his toothbrush back in his mouth, piecing a sentence together as he thoroughly brushed his molars, then jumped as Billy smacked the

inside of the shower door next to his head.

“Fucking *christ*, Harrington,” he growled. “*Today*, maybe?”

“The hell d’you wanna hear?” Steve leaned to spit in the sink, and rinse his brush, then glared over. He bit his lips on a smile at the sight of naked Billy Hargrove, covered in suds, narrowing his eyes. Steve jerked his head away, flushing.

“*You* opened your fucking mouth when it’s got *nothing in it*.” Billy smacked the glass again.

“Agh,” Steve let his head fall back against the wall. “Just—just *stay here*, god *damn*. I’m not—you don’t—I’m not gonna be—” he waved a hand, then rubbed his face with it. “M not gonna be *glad* when you *leave*.”

For a long moment, there was only the sound of running water, and then the sound of bare feet again, and the snap of a plastic cap. “...can’t leave you high and dry with Will, anyway,” Billy’s voice was muffled by the water.

“Yes! That too!” Steve reached over and slapped *his* side of the glass. “What the *hell*, *Hargrove*, you just gonna—just let him think I’d throw you *out* if we *broke up*?”

“Maybe I got drunk and kicked your ass again, and you dropped me in a ditch outside of town,” Billy laughed, and Steve started to stare at him, then rolled his eyes and smacked the glass again.

“He wouldn’t believe that—”

“Might if I *did* it,” Billy tapped the glass, and Steve frowned over, watching the water run down Billy’s shoulder and over his chest, and feeling the blood that wasn’t already in his face redirect to his crotch.

“Shut up—you look like a fucking *mermaid* in there, you’re all—”

“All?” Billy’s grin widened.

“*Wet*,” Steve gritted his teeth, and Billy leaned close, and licked up a big swath of the glass. Steve stood and pressed his face against the

other side, and Billy stumbled back, cackling, as Steve made fish faces, inflating his cheeks with his lips pressed against the glass.

Billy leaned back in, grabbing the top of the door, and the light refracted off the water in his eyelashes. His curls were dripping down his face and collarbones, then down the edge of his hand as he tucked them behind his ear. His grin looked like it was more at himself than anything else, and his eyes wouldn't meet Steve's.

"...at least stay 'til you graduate, Hargrove." He put his hands next to Billy's on the top of the door, running his thumb over wet knuckles. *His bruises have finally healed, I can't let him go. Back there. God.*

Billy licked his lips, and Steve stared. "...you sure you're up for...all this, Harrington?" he swayed his pelvis at the glass, wagging his tongue, and Steve turned his head and laughed into his upstretched arm, feeling his dick take even more of an interest.

He tried not to squirm in his jeans, turning his eyes back to Billy's. They were blue-green, reflecting the tile, and the water shone on his freckles. "Think I know what I'm getting into," Steve whispered.

Billy stepped right up to the glass, leaning his forehead against it, and bit his lip in a grin. "Yeah?"

Steve leaned his forehead against Billy's, separated by the glass, and Billy closed his eyes for a long slow breath—before pushing away, and yanking his hands free of Steve's.

"Water's gonna get cold," he said hoarsely, sticking his face right up under the showerhead, and blowing his nose.

Steve bit his lips, opened his mouth, closed it, and blew through his cheeks. "Uh. I *could* just...tell him we broke up. If—if you want, if it's easier."

The conditioner bottle bounced off the glass directly in front of Steve's face, skittered around the floor, and nearly hit Billy's foot. "*Fuck you, Harrington, are you high, make up your fucking mind—*"

"No, for real, I mean, we could just tell him. If you don't want m—to—just. Just say we can't be togeth—we can't keep it together 'cause

you're leaving m—moving away. We're—we'll stay friends, you'll stay *here*, but I couldn't—I just can't—" Steve shut his eyes, running a hand through his hair.

"Oh, 'cause *me leaving* is really gonna break *your* heart," Billy snorted.

Steve grinned and nodded, eyes stinging, and forced himself to swallow.

"...nah." Billy turned to rinse, and Steve watched the water run down his spine.

I'm not even hard anymore, he realized—even how hot Billy looked showering wasn't distracting enough from how empty the shower would look every time he walked in and remembered, and how echoey the house would be—*again*— without Billy's snide comments about singing princesses, shoes lying everywhere, careful check-ins about hot chocolate, and the scent of his cigarettes and cologne on Steve's pillow.

"Let's let him think we'll exchange syrupy love letters." Billy shot a grin over, and Steve's lungs seized.

He cleared his throat again. It didn't help. "Fuck, yeah, yes, we can—loads of—*total dumbshit* poetry. Stupid drawings on 'em. You'll get a letter with a crunched up candy heart in it and be trying to figure out what it said without saying 'yeah, your stupid candy arrived broke—'"

Billy finally turned off the water, laughing, and bent to squeeze the water out of his curls. "You don't need to *actually send any goddamn letters*, Harrington—"

Steve backpedaled. "Yeah, right. I don't have to, shit. It'll fuck with, like, you—you getting a girlfriend, or—"

"Why the *hell* would—*fine*, send me *fucking letters*," Billy took a deep breath. "I'll fucking—*woo you back*, you *royal ass*—"

Steve laughed, holding up a towel as he stepped out, and Billy stepped close to lean against him. Steve kept the towel between his hands and Billy's wet shoulders, but squeezed him tightly, rubbing

the terrycloth up and down. Billy's earring was channeling drips of water down his collarbones, and Steve patted it down with a handful of towel, tucking Billy's hair behind his ear.

Billy huffed a laugh against his shoulder, and drew back, his shoulders and neck still red from the shower, frowning at everything but Steve. "Why the fuck—that afghan is the ugliest—pink *and* brown *and* orange with *green* tassels?"

Steve snickered, aware Billy'd find other normal not-asshole people the second he got away from his dad, but inexplicably pleased at the permission to send letters. *This is even worse*, he told himself, firmly. *Instead of a clean break, now you'll be waiting for weeks for a letter. He'll never even call with an address.* It wasn't like he was any good at letters anyway. Billy'd probably be subjected to bad diagrams of how they lost basketball games. He grinned at the afghan, cheeks warm. "Mrs. Williams made it. She said she wanted it to be cheerful."

"It's...bright." Billy raised his eyebrows, pulling on the sweatpants, and running his fingers through his curls as he patted at them with the towel. He shivered.

"...put something else on." Steve leaned back against the door, keeping his hands to himself. "You almost froze to death earlier. I've got an ugly as fuck afghan and I *will* use it."

Billy snorted, shrugging.

Steve smelled the afghan, pressing the damp ropy cotton against his face, and breathing in the smell of clean laundry, and Billy's cologne. "So," he laughed. "...you think, when you're back in California..."

After a few seconds of silence, Billy parted the hair in his face to raise his eyebrows through it.

Steve leaned back against the closed door, sliding to sit against it. It creaked. He closed his eyes for a minute, then flailed his hands. "Just—you think you can go a *few fucking days* without—driving *drunk off your ass*, or *freezing to death* in a—a fucking *lawn chair*?"

"Maybe?" Billy shrugged, and Steve yanked another towel down and

threw it at his butt.

“Come on, fuckhead—”

Billy crouched down to grin at him, tucking wet curls behind his ear, and Steve’s hand twitched toward a drip running along the edge of his jaw. “You almost sound worried about me there, your right royal majesty—”

“I’m worried as hell! What if I’d fallen asleep or something, *dingus*? You coulda *died* out there!”

“*Dingus*,” Billy bit his lip in a grin. He was turning a little red across where he usually hid his freckles, and Steve wanted to grab him and shake him.

“Why do you think I *kidnapped* you, I was *losing my shit* thinking—”

“Does it count? As kidnapping?” Billy grabbed his toothbrush, and dropped in front of Steve on the floor, crossing his legs. He cocked his head. “I mean, I climbed out that window on my own. *This* time. Not like the *trunk*.” He stuck his toothbrush in his mouth, and Steve buried his face in his hands.

“Oh my god, *twice*.”

Billy patted his head, getting up to spit in the sink.

When they wandered down—sharing the afghan—and tiptoed through the kitchen towards the fort, it was glowing from within with the rainbow of Christmas lights. Will was on one edge of the mattress, out cold with his mouth hanging open.

“*Trespassers Billiam*,” Billy mouthed, wrinkling his nose, and punched Steve in the shoulder.

Steve pointed to Billy, and then the middle of the mattress, and Billy shook his head, eyebrows raised. Steve nodded, miming a shiver, and pointing at Billy again, then several times at the middle spot on the mattress, and Billy rolled his eyes, leaned his head on his hands

and pretended to snore, then pointed at Steve, then himself, then the bed, and put his hand on his crotch. He lifted it so it stuck out, widening his eyes at Steve, then pointed to the middle spot, then Will, and made a huge X of his arms, shaking his head.

Steve was trying to keep his cackling silent, shaking his head, but he crawled in, holding the blankets up for Billy to situate himself at the edge opposite from Will. He still felt chilly against Steve's hands, so he pulled him close, and Billy made a weird noise that might have been a groan if it hadn't been so high pitched, and clung to the edge of the mattress.

"Fine," Steve whispered, letting go, and Billy yanked the covers over his head.

Steve smacked a kiss against the lump under the plaid comforter, and Billy kicked back at him.

What felt like moments later, he awoke to Billy's curls brushing his face as he pulled his arm from under Steve's head, leaving a chill where Steve had apparently been using Billy's warm weight instead of a blanket. Steve squinted into the Christmas lights, listening to Billy trying to navigate in the dark and thud against the coffee table. His eyes started to drift shut again, but when he heard the fridge door open instead of the bathroom, he rubbed his face, muffled a groan into the pillow, and crawled out, hands low to intercept any malevolent furniture. He heard a familiar pop and hiss, and sure enough, in the dim light from the stove hood, Billy was leaning over the sink shotgunning a beer. There was another on the counter.

Steve waited—*nothing like choking over a shotgunned beer*—until Billy sat it in the sink, and folded his arms against the edge of the sink for a few slow breaths. "You okay?"

Billy went perfectly still, watching Steve in the dark window over the sink. His breath ratcheted up as Steve stepped closer, so Steve stopped, smacked a hand back to find the fridge, and leaned against it. Billy closed his eyes, lowering his head to rest on his arms again. He was whispering something.

It was nearly as dark in the kitchen as outside, and Steve started to relax, squinting into the darkness, before he registered Billy's shoulders shaking. "Hey," he tried. "Hey. Dickhead. Sweetheart. Asswipe. Hey, hey," he slid a hand over next to Billy's elbow, and knocked his knuckles softly against the counter.

Billy shook his head without lifting it, and grabbed a white-knuckled handful of his own curls.

Steve bit his lip, but didn't touch him, stepping close enough to lean in and hear the news that Billy was sorry he was a *fucking drunk rotten sack of shit*. "Hey, no," he whispered over the stream of furious apologies. "Hargrove. Honeymustard." He risked his thumb brushing Billy's elbow, and he went quiet—so quiet Steve was fairly sure he wasn't breathing. "Jesus," Steve whispered. "Come on, breathe, babe. Fucking—cupcake, jellybean, come on, dipshit—"

Billy shook harder, now silent, and Steve finally slid an arm between him and the sink—Billy's knees bent, and he curled away against the lower cupboards, and Steve almost let him go before registering all the knobs and the oven handle he'd be slamming back into, and pushed him sideways against the smooth wood as carefully as he could. Billy held his arms around his head, face contorted as he suppressed sobs. His wet face gleamed in the dim light, and Steve pulled him in to a careful hug.

"Deep breaths, come on, shithead, jesus—breathe, babe—I scared the shit out of you, christ, breathe—"

Billy made a soft noise in his throat, finally taking an uneven breath against Steve's neck, and Steve stroked his back. *God, not the time to crush him in a hug. Later. I'll squeeze him until he doesn't want to leave.* The air in the kitchen was cold, and Steve could feel himself getting gooseflesh as he rocked them back and forth. His legs started to ache in the awkward half-crouch. He kinda wished he'd worn a shirt to bed, feeling Billy's tears run down his collarbones and collecting in the waistband of his sweatpants. Billy's back felt as cold as earlier as he stroked it, and cupped the back of Billy's head to hold the constant mumbled "Sorry. Sorry, shit. I'm sorry,"s against his shoulder.

When Billy finally lifted his head, he jerked away, staggering upright

to the paper towels and juicily blowing his nose. Steve allowed himself to be drawn up and over by the hand clenched on the waistband of his sweatpants.

“Sorry,” Billy panted. “Fuck. Shit. I didn’t—I didn’t get any of that, Harrington, I couldn’t—” he laughed, wiping his eyes, “—I’m too fucking stupid to understand words in my own language, sometimes.” He snorted a laugh. “Most of the time—”

Steve reeled him back in. It was hard to tell whose heart was pounding harder. “Shit. Jesus. Welcome back. Christ.”

“Missed whatever you yelled at me,” Billy laughed into his shoulder again, still shaking. “T-too much of a fucking drunk to understand words. Couldn’t get my ears to switch on. Like I was fucking—underwater. Ocean. Tell me what to do again.” He took a slow breath. “I don’t hurt anywhere. You throw me out finally? Fucking—fucking getting drunk in here with your kid out there sleeping? I can just—”

“Jesus, shut up.” Steve buried his face in Billy’s curls, squeezing him, and Billy nodded, taking a shaky breath. “Not fucking throwing you out,” Steve whispered. “I’m not even mad, babe—”

“You’re mad as hell,” Billy snickered, sniffing. “You’re shaking—”

“Not mad at you,” Steve slid his hand up to rub the back of Billy’s neck. “I’m not mad *at all* at you.”

“...what now?” Billy swallowed. “You’ll get pissed again if I try and blow you. Probably *been* apologizing. I fucking apologize *better* now, is that right?” He laughed. “I thought. Y’know, finally, this is the part where you grab my hair and slam my face into the counter.”

“You didn’t do anything, Jesus. I don’t give a shit if you wanna finish off my shitty beer.”

“I’m *shameful*,” Billy snorted into his shoulder. “I can’t stay sober for *one day* to help a little kid build a pillow fort. You should hate me even more now.” He was giggling, whispering in Steve’s ear, and Steve wanted nothing so much as to shove away, but he yanked him

closer, trying to think calm thoughts, and not charge off to beat Neil Hargrove's head in with a bat.

"Christ, shut up," Steve muttered instead. "Stop—stop telling me I hate you, I *don't*."

"Fucking *scum*." Billy breathed against his ear, his warm lips brushing Steve's neck. "Throw me off those stairs. Back out in the fucking snow. Make a better ice sculpture than I do a human being —"

"*Stop*," Steve hugged him closer, pressing their heads together so Billy didn't *lick* him. "Sorry I scared the shit out of you. Don't flip your shit. I shoulda waited."

"...fuck, I got you all snotty again," Billy swallowed, pulling away enough to grab another paper towel, and start dabbing at Steve's chest. "God, I'm disgusting."

"Y'know," Steve leaned back against the counter, as Billy pushed him back to wet the paper towel in the sink. "You—you drink a lot, and yeah, you cry a shit ton—"

"Fuck you," Billy muttered, running his fingers under the faucet to test the temperature.

"No, just, I mean—anybody would, right. Your whole *life* is bullshit." Steve jerked as Billy pressed the hot, wrung-out paper towel against Steve's chest, wiping where tears had run down his pectorals. "I, um, I think—I think you're doing okay."

"Just blew my lid because you *walked in the kitchen*." Billy wiped the hot towel along Steve's collarbones, and he shivered, and tried to keep his train of thought.

"Yeah," Steve whispered. "Yeah, but like. That's 'cause something *happened*, right. You don't just—"

"Man up and ask," Billy growled, stalking back to the sink and wetting a new paper towel.

Steve pushed himself up to sit on the counter. "No, I don't—I mean, I

can guess, you don't have to tell me anything. I mean. You don't ...*want* to, right—”

“Fuck no.”

Steve took the paper towel when he wandered back over, lifting Billy's chin to wipe under his eyes. “Okay, then.” Billy's eyes widened and teared up again as Steve carefully patted along his moustache, and Steve yanked him close again, laughing into his hair. “Christ. Maybe if everyone wasn't so *shitty* to you, me being *normal* wouldn't set you off—”

“You are not normal,” Billy huffed a laugh against his chest. “You are abnormal. You are a fucking *mutant*. God. I'm fucking *exhausted*.”

“We should get back to sleep,” Steve didn't let go. “...d'you need the other beer, first?”

Billy flinched.

“Listen, I...used to, um, I dated Carol's sister. Couple years older—”

“Shit, I don't care,” Billy slumped against him, his skin cool and still damp, and Steve kept rubbing his neck.

“No, I know, I just—” Steve grimaced. “Uh, before she went to college, her mom was taking her on this trip for a couple weeks, and she knew she wouldn't be able to—hide. Y'know. Things. So we said she had the flu.”

“...mmm,” Billy slid his arms around Steve's waist, yawning hot against his shoulder.

“So, uh. She came over and hugged a toilet for a few days, and—I mean, it sucked, no lie, but I don't think you're any worse than she was.”

Billy grunted, then lifted his head, squinting. “...you're offering to help me dry out? Jesus, Steve.”

“If you want. I'm good at calling people in sick,” he grinned, “—

want me to get you some aspirin?"

"I guess," Billy mumbled, dropping his head back to Steve's shoulder, "...wait, *that's* why you're friends with Tommy and Carol. Carol's *sister*."

"I guess?" Steve shrugged.

After he chugged the second beer, Billy allowed himself to be hauled upstairs, and pushed in the right direction a few times as he stumbled. He swallowed the aspirin dry, then sighed and accepted the glass of water Steve shoved at him, dropping to sit on the floor. He leaned against the bathtub, letting his eyes drift shut as he drank it.

Steve grabbed the glass, slapping his toothbrush in his hand, and Billy brandished it like a knife, glaring.

"...didn't think you'd noticed," he breathed, then winced. "I mean—I musta been pretty fucking obvious—I know you saw me hiding the tequila behind the microwave. When we were making bread."

"I wasn't sure," Steve shrugged, outside the open bathroom door, his eyes on the window. "But it'd be, y'know, *good*, if you could stay sober driving—driving home."

"Depends on how I'm paying for it," Billy snickered, and Steve frowned over, but then he shrugged. "Sounds shitty, but. Sure. I guess."

Steve kept his arm around Billy's shoulder on the way down the stairs, and Billy leaned in to whisper "So what now, Harrington, do you rock me to sleep?"

"Don't test me," Steve whispered back. *Jesus, here it is, the part of the slumber party where he's so tired everything's hilarious.*

"In your lap?" Billy grinned, and Steve barely resisted kissing his

face.

“Necessary part of the slumber party,” Steve whispered back, and Billy snorted.

“Never got invited.” He thudded against Steve as they got near the mattress, knocking them both into it, and Steve ended with an armful of Billy Hargrove, trying to giggle silently, the two of them sprawled on top of the blankets. Steve rocked him, whispering Rock-a-bye-baby in his ear, and getting a mouth full of earring, which made Billy laugh harder, strumming an air guitar along with Steve’s mumbled lullaby rendition.

Billy’s silent wheezes of laughter shook the mattress until Will mumbled in his sleep, and Billy finally just rolled them both sideways off the mound of blankets, curling into Steve and pulling the blanket over their heads. It was hard for Steve to stop laughing, when every time he started to doze off, he could still feel the back pressed against him shaking with giggles.

Will awakened them with *Fellowship of the Ring* at seven o’clock. Steve squinted at the clock, and then smacked back at him with a pillow, but Billy waved. “S’fine. Jus’ sleep.”

“Nope!” Will clambered over and dropped his skinny butt on Billy’s back, which was half on Steve, and both older boys yelped. “These books are *really long*, guys, we gotta get reading. I made a schedule —”

“I thought this fucking kid was cute,” Billy grabbed a pillow, trying to hide, and Steve held up a hand.

“Nother hour, Will. Just—just another hour.”

“*Fine*,” Will groaned, flopping backwards across their legs, and Steve pulled Billy closer, trying not to think about sleeping alone.

When Billy *did* consent to be awoken, he stumbled and grumbled his

way to the kitchen, and Steve huddled tighter under the blankets.

After a while expecting attack, he caught the smell of *bacon*. He sat up in bed, looking around at piles of blankets and pillows, then followed soft voices to the kitchen, where Will was sitting on the counter kicking his feet, and Billy was chopping something. Steve waited until the blade of the knife wasn't near anything, and pulled out a chair. "Smells so *good* in here."

"He says I'm Boromir," Billy grinned over. "I have no idea who that is, but—"

"He saves the Ringbearer and prevents Sauron from taking over the world, his mom's gone, and his dad is a *shithead*," Will reported, and Billy cocked his head, nodding.

"Uh, your majesty," Billy turned to face Steve, wiping the knife, and sitting it back on the counter. "Omelettes are almost ready."

"We were gonna bring you breakfast in bed," Will grinned, "—and read—"

"Eat first, *jesus*," Billy rolled his eyes.

"Really," Steve stood, preparing to sneak over, and Billy pointed the spatula at him.

"Siddown."

Steve did. When the omelette, bacon, and fried potatoes landed in front of him, he stared. "Holy fuck, Hargrove, this looks like *restaurant* food."

"Yours does," Billy handed over Will's—somewhat smaller—selection, and pulled up a chair with his own, which had apparently tipped over and spilled most of its filling.

Steve took a huge bite, and groaned happily. "Oh my god, you asshole, this is amazing. I love the—cheese, it's melty—there's *crunchy* things!" He took another bite, and Billy snickered, choking. "And spicy things!" Steve gave him both thumbs up. "Mm!"

Will nodded, wide-eyed. “You cook better than my mom—” he leaned back to yell “Sorry, Mom!” at the ceiling, and grimaced at his plate, while Steve cackled, leaning to bump shoulders with Billy.

“You don’t have to cook all the time, dude,” he shoveled in another bite. “So damn good, though—”

“You’ve never even seen the movies? Steve has the movies,” Will’s track switched back to *Lord of the Rings* as though they’d never left the subject.

“My dad likes C. S. Lewis.” Billy shrugged, watching Steve vacuum his omelette. “I read Narnia.”

“*Narnia*.” Will took a big bite, crossed his arms, and chewed, and Steve tried not to snort.

“They were friends, y’know,” Billy grinned over, “—C. S. Lewis and Tolkien. C. S. Lewis wanted more religion in his books, he was a theologian—”

Will blinked, wide-eyed, and Billy was in the middle of explaining what *that* was, with phrases like *biblical inerrancy* and referring to *discrepancies between the books of Genesis* when Steve could not hold his laughter in anymore. He buried his face in his arms, cackling, and Billy shut up mid-sentence. The knife on Steve’s plate scraped, and he lifted his head, wiping his eyes, to see Billy collecting the dishes.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to throw you off,” Steve snickered. “Oh my god, I have such a—”

“I know it sounds dumb, I’m probably getting it wrong, you can shut the fuck up now.” Billy cranked on the water, leaning against the sink. “It—it was—I probably didn’t even understand it.”

“Shit, no, you were making sense, that’s why I was *laughing*,” Steve balled up his napkin and tossed it at Billy’s butt, “—you see it, right, Will, here I am fucking—fucking *moon*ing over this curly brunette with *booksmarts*.”

Will blinked between them, and started giggling. “You did make sense,” he beamed over. “I don’t know anything about that stuff—”

“See? And he’s a toddler, if it made sense to a *toddler*—”

Will cackled, kicking Steve under the table. “How come I keep getting *younger*?”

Steve grabbed Will’s napkin and threw that too, and Billy squinted at him. Steve wheezed, “All this time you’ve been pretending you were *normal*, and you’re *smart as hell*, you asshole fuck. I have a *type*, oh my god.” He buried his face in his arms again, laughing.

“I was just saying what I read,” Billy shook his head, smiling tightly. “I remembered some of it. Don’t get your hopes up that I’m—*different*, I’m still Billy fucking Hargrove, and that’s—”

“Yeah, you keep saying that,” Steve got up, letting himself tip forward to pin Billy. He slid his arms around him, reaching to turn off the water, and whispering in Billy’s ear. “*I* keep finding curly brunettes that are way too smart for me. Long eyelashes and big eyes, *jesus*.” Billy’s face was hot to the touch when Steve leaned in to kiss his freckles, then his mouth.

“Augh,” Will flailed in the corner of Steve’s eye, “—euaaaah! I don’t *want* to know your *turn-ons*, Steve!”

Steve pulled Billy closer, sliding his hand through the soft curls in question, and tucking his face against Billy’s cheek—and Will’s chair groaned against the floor as he pushed it out from the table and fled to the front room.

“Let’s *read* when you’re *ready*,” he yelled over his shoulder, and Steve pulled back, clearing his throat, and turned on the water to wash the dishes.

“Fucking chaperone coulda stuck around long enough for a *real* kiss,” Billy stepped close and leaned his hot face against Steve’s shoulder, taking a deep breath. “Well fucking played, he thinks you think I’m a *catch*.”

Steve bit his lips, then leaned to bump shoulders. “You know you *are* a catch, though—”

“*Jesus* fuck,” Billy shoved away, stalking back into the front room.

Steve turned off the water and followed him out to find him face-down in a pillow, neck and ears red.

“*Finally*,” Will groaned.

After breakfast, and *one* chapter of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, with many questions such as “What are *hobbits*,” and “What do you *mean* I missed the dragon,” Billy drove off to the auto-repair place, and Steve started the dishes. Will picked up the phone on the third ring, when Steve yelled that he was up to his elbows in suds, and leaned so Will could hold it to his ear.

“Hey, kid,” came Hopper’s voice, audible to both of them through the loud handset.

“Sheriff Hopper?” Steve took a deep breath. “Did—did something happen?”

Hopper sighed. “Not yet. But Neil Hargrove called. He says there’s stuff missing from his house. He’s considering pressing charges for robbery.”

“...what?” Steve tried.

“He’s accusing your boy Billy of robbing his house.”

“He—he just took—he took *socks*. Some sweatshirts. His schoolbooks,” Steve breathed, and Hopper sighed again.

“Yeah, I figured. But since Billy’s a minor, it’s sticky. When’s he turn eighteen?”

“I—I don’t know—”

“Huh. Well, we can keep Mr. Hargrove wading upstream with it—”

“But it’s *his stuff*,” Steve prodded the melted cheese he was scrubbing, his brain watching film of Billy being loaded into a police car, and mug shots, and orange outfits, “—they’re—they’re just his *clothes*—” Will was quiet, holding the phone up, and Steve grabbed the hand

towel, drying off so he could take the phone, and pull Will's head to rest against him.

"Yeah, son, I know."

Steve flailed an arm, wanting to pace in a circle. "He—he can borrow my clothes, we can give his clothes *back*—"

"You gonna buy him a new car, too? Calm down, kid. Neil Hargrove won't realize we're giving him the runaround for a while. Max said Billy's leaving town anyway. When?"

"He was—we thought he'd stay here. Just until he graduated." Steve could hear his voice getting a little high, and tried to swallow down the thickness in his throat.

"Might want to speed that timeline up a bit. We can keep the man chasing his tail—it'll keep him busy for a while, but it's gonna piss him off, eventually, and he's—we don't know what he'll try then. Might want to keep an eye on your boy, until you can get him out of town."

"Shit," Steve ruffled Will's hair, dodging his batting hands, "—I need to go, Hopper, he's getting his car fixed. Wait—do you, uh."

Hopper waited on the line.

"Uh," Steve swallowed. "You know when I asked you about Billy's mom. Um, do you—can I have her number?"

"...lemme look it up," Hopper sighed. "I'll call back with it—"

"Don't leave it as a message," Steve cringed into the phone. "He thinks she hates him, I just wanna talk to her—"

"Yeah, okay, kid." There were some rustling noises. "I found it, you got a pen?" Steve wrote it in the magnet pad on the fridge, and folded it up in his pocket. "You play it safe, Steve, and give me a call if you need anything."

"If—if Mr. Hargrove comes?"

"Then you *definitely* give me a call. And—kid. Don't open the door."

"Okay. Okay. Yeah. Okay. Thank you. I—I gotta go."

"I can finish the dishes," Will said in a small voice, once Steve had hung up.

"Shit, thanks," Steve squeezed his shoulder, and ran to pull on his shoes, "—we'll be back soon. Sorry."

When Steve pulled up to the service place, they had the Camaro's hood up, but Billy was nowhere to be seen. Steve popped in the office and took care of the bill, sending up a little prayer that nobody receiving the bill'd look at the make and model of the car requiring a new battery, then accepted a paper cup of coffee, and stood out on the sidewalk. He almost spilled it when he was suddenly *drug*, Billy's fist in his jacket, around the corner of the building.

Billy hauled him clear down by the dumpsters, in the cement-walled dead end between the car shop, a cinderblock fence, and what smelled like a neighboring pizza place. "Harrington," he unfolded a piece of paper from his pocket, and flattened it against his leg. "I—I swung by the clinic first, they had my—"

"Hargrove, I need to talk to—"

"Shut up, shut up," Billy put a hand over Steve's mouth, then yanked it back. "I'm—I'm talking, don't—don't pretend you can't hear me."

"It's *important*, dickface—"

"*This* is important," Billy held his hands up, twitching towards Steve, then smacked the paper into his free hand. "Not to you, but. It's—it'll just take a sec, just—come on."

"Yeah." Steve nodded, leaning against the wall next to the dumpster to watch Billy pacing around, flicking his lighter five times more than he should have needed to to light his cigarette, and swearing quietly into his cupped hands. "Am I listening or reading—"

"I know this wasn't—anything," he waved his hand between them, smirking at the wall behind Steve. "But I thought—if you thought—"

Steve snorted. "My purty talkin's rubbing off on you." He drained his cup, and tossed it behind him into the dumpster.

"Fucking read it." Billy leaned against the wall next to him, taking a long draw on his cigarette.

The paper was Billy's test results for STDs, and Steve blinked, reading *Negative. Negative. Negative*, in a long line.

"If—just, if that's why," Billy laughed, blowing smoke in a long trail. "I'm clean. At least. And you came, *your majesty*, don't pretend I was no good. You *fucking liked it*. You liked my mouth." He flicked his tongue at Steve, but wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Jesus, B—Hargrove," Steve folded it back up, his mouth stumbling as his brain started running like a hamster wheel. *Shit, shit, shit. What—*

Billy snatched it back. "*Fuck* you, fine, sorry I don't have a fucking *cunt*, my liege. Tell me when to *clear out* when you bring home all those *other bitches* in the sea—" he shoved by, and Steve caught him around the waist, letting Billy's momentum spin them around.

"Shit, gimme a second, goddamn. Hopper called, your—" Billy'd gone rigid against him, watching his face, and Steve forced a smile. "It's okay, he's got your back. For—for now, it's fine."

"The fuck did he say," Billy shoved him back against the dumpster, crumpling the test results and tossing them over Steve's shoulder to land in the trash.

"Your dad's...he's making trouble. You should—" The refrain of *shit, shit, shit* in his head was like a broken record.

"*The fuck did he say, Harrington*," Billy leaned in close, blowing cigarette smoke that smelled like toothpaste.

"He—he wants you arrested for theft," Steve grimaced, "—Hopper said they'll, uh, keep him chasing his tail? But you should leave town

—*Hargrove*—” Billy clenched a hand in Steve’s jacket, and slammed the other one into the dumpster, and Steve tried to protect his face, then scrambled to grab the fist that’d connected with the dumpster. It’d made a loud bang, but he wagged Billy’s gloved fingers, and he didn’t wince. *Could be adrenaline, though*— “Shit, hold on, Hargrove —”

“Just a dumpster, Harrington,” Billy grinned, shoving him off. “— just fucking trash back here. I’m just *thieving trash*, right, it doesn’t *matter*, let me *fucking*—”

“Wait, wait, wait, shit.” Steve grabbed him around the upper arms. “Hold the fuck up, don’t break your hand. Don’t *punch the dumpster*, christ. Come back with me. Come on. We’ll go—we’ll throw bottles, come on—”

Billy pulled himself into the shaking tension Steve remembered from first meeting him, slapping a smile on his face and allowing himself to be drawn back to Steve’s car. “So I’m going to jail,” he laughed over, as Steve pulled away from the curb. “For taking my shit. That’s new, actually. Used to be for assault. Or I was gonna set myself on fire.”

“What.” Steve tried not to speed—the last thing he needed was Billy deciding he and the sheriff department needed to have a shootout at the OK Corral. “And you’re *not*, you’re not going to jail, what are you even—”

“Yeah, I shoved him back. He said he’d have them try me as an adult. For assault. Adults can get the death penalty, y’know? His word against mine. Shit.” Billy let his head loll against the window, his breath coming fast through his clenched teeth. “Adults get the electric chair. I’m big, I’m strong, nobody’ll ever believe I didn’t swing at him. It’s actually lethal injection here, I looked it up.”

“Hopper believes you,” Steve blinked to clear his eyes for driving, and flapped a hand over until he found Billy’s. He squeezed it. “He said he’ll give him the runaround until you get out of town.”

“Sure. I’ve never fucking *talked* to Hopper—”

“He believes *me*, then,” Steve swung around a turn. “And I have a bat, babe. Shit. Bi—dickhead. We won’t—he’s not *taking you* anywhere.”

Billy was laughing over his verbal stumbling, but his breaths were still sounding punched out of him. “He said I was gonna burn to death. One of these times coming home drunk, if I didn’t go in the ravine, I was gonna—I’d spill some liquor, and drop a cigarette. Burn to death in my car. He—he said it almost happened. He found me passed out. He said he wouldn’t try and—he’d just leave me—”

“Christ,” Steve swallowed, listening to Billy try to force himself to breathe. He was making these awful muted screaming noises between his teeth, trying to muffle them with the arm of his jacket.

“Fucking inferno,” Billy whispered, and Steve squeezed his hand again, patting it uselessly.

“Billy. Tell me about your dumb nerd music. Goblins, and—”

“Didn’t bring any,” Billy’s laugh sounded strangled, as he grinned over, but at least he wasn’t staring at the flames of his imagined death out the window.

“What’s that sugar song you’re always singing. What’s that about.”

“It’s—it’s *Def Leppard*,” Billy swallowed, closing his eyes.

“Almost there,” Steve told him, and kept asking about the band, and their other songs. Billy was describing one of their music videos as they pulled up in the driveway, and Steve squeezed his shoulder. “Okay, I’m gonna go get—we can throw bottles at trees, or something, okay?”

Billy snorted, letting his head fall back against the headrest. “You don’t want me in there around Will.”

“I’m just going in the garage, we don’t need snow in the house. I’ll grab you another jacket.” At Billy’s smirk and nod, he dashed in, grabbed his ski jacket, found a crate, started loading it up with bottles, and saw his bright red toy bat leaning in with the skis. He opened the door to the house and leaned in. “Hey, Will?”

Everything's fine, but we're gonna go and just—scream at the woods—I guess—”

Will's head popped around the doorway to the front room. “Okay..?”

“Sorry,” Steve waved. “We'll be back soon.”

Billy was having a smoke, and Steve rolled his eyes, flumping the crate of bottles in the snow by his feet, and digging gloves out of the pockets of the jacket. He grabbed the hand without a cigarette in it to tug a glove on to.

“I'd think being from California, you'd be *more* worried about the cold, not *less*,” he growled, as Billy stuck the cigarette in his mouth and surrendered his other hand. He was already pink-cheeked from the wind. “Christ. I hope you wear *sunscreen*.”

“Why, you wanna put it on me?” Billy allowed himself to be maneuvered into the coat, wagging his tongue.

“That's all I can *do*, apparently, I can't keep *anyone safe*.” Steve shoved the crate of bottles at him, and stalked off around the side of the house.

“Uh. Where'd...the toy bat come from?”

Steve twirled it. “Got it for me before I was old enough to join Little League. Used to hit trees with it. Doesn't, y'know, vibrate your whole arm like a wood one.”

“That what that trophy was for? Little League? By your bed.”

“Yee-up.”

“You don't still play?”

“Stuff happened.” Steve led him over to the trees, and spun the bat around his hand to offer the handle. Billy rolled his eyes, but took it.

“What, I’m supposed to hit a tree?”

“Or throw bottles into that rock over the ditch. Pretend it’s your dad. Pretend it’s—”

“I got something.” Billy tromped through the snow over to a tree, and hit it.

“Harder,” Steve coached, “—and call it a fuckhead.” Billy grinned back at him, and shook his head, but faced up against it again.

As Billy got into it, he got louder, and Steve looked over to see Ms. Williams’ face pressed against her window. Billy didn’t notice him waving, too busy roaring profanities at a tree, so Steve jogged over to her house, stomping on the porch and blowing into his hands as she opened the door.

“Sorry.” He waved at the shuddering trunk. “He’s, uh, there’s a lot going on, so I gave him my old plastic bat.”

She nodded slowly. “Well, he doesn’t look like he needs any assistance.”

“Maybe I’ll go back later and cheer,” Steve nodded, frowning over the porch railing, “—I just didn’t want you to think we were fighting.”

“You look tired, again.” She held out the bowl of strawberry-shaped candies, and he grabbed a handful. Billy’d actually eaten one. *Maybe his tongue’s too sharp to mind candy shrapnel.* He crouched to hug the head of the nearest dog, and then frowned up. “Ma’am, would you —”

She raised her eyebrows, and he bit his lips.

“M-may I use your phone?”

She set him up at her little phone desk, with pencils, and a paper pad, and he dialed Billy’s mother. He let it ring for several minutes, then hung up and let his head drop against the desk.

When Steve wandered back out, he had two mugs of hot cider, and Billy was starting to get slow and clumsy with the bat. “Hey,” he held out the mug, and Billy squinted at it, then at him, panting.

“Where’d...I didn’t buy cider.”

Steve stepped closer, raising his eyebrows, and Billy took it, inhaling.

“...this isn’t mix cider. Where’d you even—” he frowned behind Steve, flushed, and put his hand up and waved.

Steve swung around to see Ms. Williams waving in the window, and waved back. “Figured I’d give you a minute. Y’know, just in case my face was on any of those bottles you were busting.”

“What,” Billy laughed. “Why—*no*.”

“I dunno, you were pretty mad last night.”

“I wasn’t—ugh.” He tossed the bat down to wrap both gloves around the mug of cider. “...thanks for—this.”

“Sure,” Steve reached over and brushed snow out of the hair around Billy’s ear, flicking his earring. “Should get you a hat.”

“Nah,” Billy grinned. “You can keep touching my hair. I’m gonna make lasagna,” he took the last swig, and grabbed the bat, “—and then I think I can sit still.” He laughed. “Maybe.”

“Use it all you want,” Steve couldn’t fight back a huge grin, “—It helped?”

“Didn’t even need the bottles,” Billy said, shrugging, and Steve grabbed one and hucked it at the rock he’d pointed out in the ditch, sighing as it exploded in a shower of sparkles.

Steve considered whose face he wanted to hit, aiming another bottle. He tried not to think about Neil Hargrove. “We might as well toss ‘em, we drug ‘em out here. That one was my *math* teacher who uses

essay questions.” He grabbed another. “And *Hawkins Labs*.”

Billy watched, mouth quirked, then grabbed one, frowned at it, biting his lips together, and threw it with a grunt of effort. He took a shaky breath when it shattered, and Steve wondered who it had been aimed at, but just offered another. Billy got through about half the crate before they were both laughing too hard, bent over.

“So,” Steve staggered, snickering, and Billy grabbed his jacket, steadying them both. “You were *not* in Little League.”

“Fuck you! How the hell do I *keep missing*—”

“It’s a huge fuckin’ rock,” Steve wheezed, smacking his shoulder. “It’s huge, how—we’re like twenty feet away, dude—do you need me to paint a target on there, or—”

“I could probably *lift* it—I could throw *you* at it—” Billy slid an arm around Steve and hefted him, grinning, and Steve kicked, shoving at his shoulder, and discovering the appeal of muscles that could lift him one-handed.

“No! No! I’m sorry!” he cackled. “I won’t make fun of your *shitty-as-hell aim*! I promise—here, put me down.” He stumbled in the snow as Billy sat him back on his feet, and turned away to cover his face.

Oh my god, would it be too obvious if I put SNOW on my face, I’m on FIRE, wait, I need to just—he let himself fall forward, flumping body-length in the snow. Calm the fuck down, Steve, he’s leaving. He’s leaving. He’s leaving. If you jumped him right now he’d probably think he owed you. Just—just pushed him right down in the snow and yanked his pants open. Kissed his lips until they were hot from our breath. Christ.

“What the hell,” Billy crouched next to him, prodding his shoulder.

Steve lifted his face out of the snow enough to talk. “I’m making a snow angel.”

“I think you’re doing it wrong,” Billy dropped next to him. “You’re such a dork. Can you breathe?”

“I’m fine,” Steve groaned. “Kill me.” He turned his head, opening

his mouth, and Billy was sitting in the snow, watching him with pink cheeks and snow in his hair. Steve put his face back in the snow, willing the hot tightness in his pants to subside, particularly where it was kinda squashed by a lump of snow. “Christ,” he whispered, into his hands.

“If you’re so amazing, *you* throw them,” Billy growled, punching his butt.

“I *will*.” Steve tottered to his feet, arms numb, and regretting his decision to stick his dick in the snow, even if in *hindsight* he couldn’t think of a better idea that didn’t involve Billy’s mouth—*jesus, I need a long shower with the door locked*. He tried to push his hair out of his face with gloves on, and then just shook it. “I’ll show you up. Gimme a bottle.”

Billy got up, brushing himself off, eyebrows raised.

“And name it.”

“What?” He frowned over.

“Fucking name it, or picture a face, or something.”

“Okay?” Billy held one out, and Steve threw his best pitch into the mound of bottles that’d rolled unbroken from either side of the rock. The crash sent some birds flying up from the surrounding trees, and Billy burst out laughing, wide-eyed. “Holy shit.”

Steve accepted the last couple, tagging an outlier, then wagging the last one. “This one’s just a ‘Fuck it, why do you have to leave.’”

Billy blinked at him, watched it shatter, and ducked his head. He took a deep breath, tucking his hair behind his ear.

Steve slung an arm around him. “Come on, dickweed. Let’s go make lasagna. Tell me what to do.”

“Fuck no,” Billy leaned into him, glancing over with a small grin, “—I’ll tell *Will* what to do with the food. *You* can read to us about goblins.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Billy's alcohol abuse finally gets talked about, and his dad tries to mess with him again through Hopper, but Hopper isn't having it. Billy has a panic attack. (If there's anything you think I should warn about in this or any other chapter, let me know! I'm forgetful but I will fix things if you tell me!

Thank you so much for wandering in! Lemme know if you liked my story--I lovelovelove hearing from people! Kudos! Short comments! Long comments! Questions! Constructive criticism! Comments as extra kudos! Thanks so, so much! XD

(I try to reply to each one, but if you don't want a response to your comment then please say "No reply please" or "Whisper" so I'll know not to reply.)

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9. Friends Don't Let Friends Suffer Amnesia Tropes

Summary for the Chapter:

Our boys communicate! Steve does his best to figure out the major issues he and Billy have had, and Billy has some things to say too! Will forces them to read the Fellowship of the Rings! Super gooey sweet chapter for Halloween, since the chapter for Valentine's was Billy trying to firebomb Steve's house...because that makes sense...they finally Perform A Sex!

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: Alcohol use! Sexual contact and situations! Weird and regrettable (but just embarrassing) sex decisions! Suspense! The scenes with sex in them are pretty long with a low ratio of sex-to-talking, but I said I'd mark them, so I will! Any scenes with sexual activity in them will have a horizontal line before and after. If you need more, ask! For details see end notes!

Thank you so, so much to everyone who reads, to my spectacular commenters, and my fabulous and generous beta readers, Bavzel, Tbehartoo, and hobbit!

They were kicking the steps to knock snow off their shoes when Will threw the door open, staring them up and down. Words spilled out of him like he'd been holding his breath.

“...Max called. I told her what Hopper said, about calling him and locking the doors.”

“What?” Billy grabbed the door frame, trying to untie one shoe while standing in the other, and Will and Steve both reached out to steady him. “What the hell’s that even mean?”

"If your dad shows up, Sheriff Hopper says to keep you inside with the doors locked, and call him." Steve watched as Billy stumbled inside, promptly walked across lumps of snow in his socks, and swore. "Tried to tell you, but you were starting a fight with a dumpster."

As Steve struggled with his own shoes, Will followed Billy to the kitchen table. "Are you okay?"

"We're supposed to lock him *out*?" Billy squinted, frowning between them, and Will nodded. "Just—*lock him out*. Of the house. It'll just piss him off—"

Will was staring between them. "Him? Your dad?"

"Just until Hopper gets here." Steve fumbled at his frozen laces with numb fingers.

"*Hopper* has to come haul me out from under your bed, he'll be as pissed off as *he* is—" Billy pulled the snow lumps off his socks, and grimaced, tugging at the transparent wet spots. "I'm not..."

"He doesn't know you're here, don't freak out. But if he pulls up in the drive, *Hargrove*, don't open the door. Go upstairs and call Hopper."

"No. You're a fucking moron, you can't—"

"I'm not, I'm normal, and you're not dumb either." Steve finally kicked off his other shoe, peeled out of his socks in an explosion of all the snow that had worked under the cuffs of his pants, and jogged over to pull a chair out. He sat the wrong way around in it, folding his arms across the back and facing Billy. "Come on. If you see his car. No reason to think he even knows you're here. Just slide the lock closed on the door, go upstairs, and lock your bedroom door." Billy shook his head, glancing at Steve's bare red feet and focusing on pulling his own socks off, and Steve groaned. "B—*Hargrove*. Go upstairs. Call Hopper. Wait for me."

"I'm not—I'm—what are you *saying*, even, you're gonna—you're scaring your kid." Billy waved at Will, who swallowed.

"If he doesn't wanna hear, he can go in the other room." Steve reached out and squeezed Will's shoulder, trying to grin convincingly enough that his shoulders would relax. He couldn't. "Hargrove. Seriously—"

"I'm starting lunch," Billy leaned away, standing, "—come on, toddler, help me out."

"Okay..." Will's eyes flicked between them, wide and worried, and Steve leaned over to poke him in the wrinkle between his eyebrows.

"Will, he's gonna be *fine*, if we can get him off his bullshit—"

"Shut up, Harrington," Billy sighed, crouching by a lower cupboard. "Will, get the cheese out—Harrington, sit your ass down, I don't want food poisoning."

"I'm getting us socks." Steve rolled his eyes, and grabbed a raggy towel from the pantry to kick around in the ice water on the floor. When he wandered back in with socks, Billy was chopping things, and Will was pressing them into a rectangular pan.

"Oh thank god," Billy rolled his eyes, "—the king's back to supervise. What ever did we do without him."

Steve raised his eyebrows, dropping into a chair to put on his dry socks. "...yeah, you better drop what you're doing and get my advice, I lived for two weeks once on spray-can Velveeta."

Billy choked, covering his sputter, and leaned on the counter to laugh. "What?!"

"Why?!" Will giggled.

"I used instant coffee on cereal once," Steve wiggled his toes, enjoying the warmth. "Makes it pretty soggy."

"Oh my god." Billy dropped his head into his arms, cackling.

"Oh, I do have some wise food advice, actually: Orange juice is *not* good on *instant oatmeal*." Steve waggled his eyebrows, and Billy gagged.

“Ew ew ew ew ewww,” Will was chanting.

“And you aren’t supposed to heat up potato salad. I think.” Steve narrowed his eyes at the window, and Billy smacked the spatula down, glared over, and yelled “No!” Steve fought to hold a straight face. “They put it in with the fried chicken and applesauce! It wasn’t too bad all mixed together, kinda like that Chinese fried stuff with sweet sauce—”

“I’m gonna hurl,” Will groaned.

Billy stared over, laughing, with wide eyes. “Are you *shitting* me?! How do you not have *scurvy*.”

“I ate some teabags once,” Steve replied, cheerfully, and Billy stomped over to slide a hand around the back of his head and yank him into a kiss.

“You’re gonna die without me.”

Steve laughed against his mouth. “—I get takeout—”

“I need to talk to that Williams lady,” Billy whispered, staring into his face, “—maybe she can feed you sometimes.”

Steve grabbed his hands, and pressed clean socks into them, grinning up, and Billy swung them to smack into the side of Steve’s head.

“You’re gonna write these damn letters and tell me what you’re *eating*.” He smacked Steve with the socks again, and Steve started to cackle, collapsing against the table. “Don’t you fucking lie to me. And order some *goddamn broccoli*.”

“I can—I can do that,” Steve wheezed into his arms, wiping his eyes. “I’ll eat anything. Nancy used to feed me her brussels sprouts, she hates ‘em—”

“Make *those*, then!” Billy whapped him across the head with the socks. “If you fucking—”

“Gross!” Will gagged. “They’re worse than the teabags!”

“They are *really not good*,” Steve agreed, batting away the socks, and Billy stopped to squint at him.

“...then why were you *eating* them.”

“I mean, I didn’t love them,” Steve grinned up, “—but I sure loved *Nancy*.”

Billy went still, then dropped into a chair to pull the socks on. “...get Will’s book, and shut up, Harrington.”

Before Steve could comment that *reading aloud silently* sounded like a challenge, Billy kicked his chair, hard enough to shove him into the table, and stalked off into the front room. When he returned, he went to smack Steve in the head with the book, and Steve grabbed his forearm, turned it to take the book, and kissed the soft part of Billy’s wrist—then wished he’d looked up, because Billy made a soft noise in his throat, smacked Steve’s hands away, and jogged over to lean against the counter.

“Uh,” Will leaned to look at him, then back at Steve, “—should—what should I—”

Billy cleared his throat. “Add some more goddamn ricotta.”

They ended up making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, waiting the interminable hours while the smell of lasagna started to fill the house. Billy made noises about their ‘spoiling their lunch,’ Will called him a mom, and fled to Steve, who held him in place while Billy hesitated before tickling his feet.

Listening to anyone trying to read Lord of the Rings with peanut butter in their mouths was wildly entertaining. *Particularly*, Steve thought, *when they’re talking about elves, and all the Great Battles of History*. He couldn’t see why the recitation of *these* battles was much more exciting than the paper he still needed to outline about the Revolutionary War, but the Trespassers William were giggling, so he tried to pay attention. They settled in the fort.

After an hour or so, Steve scooted over and took up the unfamiliar

Nintendo controller, trying to figure out why you'd want to program a video game to play tennis. He was half-listening to Will reading about the Fellowship Of Midgets meeting some hippie dude in the woods, when Billy dropped next to him on the mattress and curled up with his head in Steve's lap.

Steve won the tennis match, and ran his fingers absently along Billy's cheek during the victory music. His thumb caught. "Wow, you need to shave—and you've got so *many freckles*," he whispered, bending down to look, and grinning, "—get a little sun off the snow this morning?" After seeing tanned abs in the gym showers in the middle of Indiana winter, Steve had had his suspicions about Billy Hargrove actually lairing in a tanning bed like some kind of...Californian Sunpire, but the freckles clinched it.

"Shut up." Billy batted his hand away. "Figured it didn't matter, not like you're gonna like me any better no matter what I look like."

"That's so *true*." Steve tossed the controller aside, gathering Billy up in his arms and peppering kisses all over his face. Billy yelped out a stream of 'fuck's, squirming, and Steve flopped sideways to put an arm around him, nuzzling his side. "I promise I'll like you *just as much tomorrow*, when you cover up all your freckles, as long as I get to say hello to them today—" He pressed kisses to the warm tanned skin where Billy's shirt had ridden up. "You've got freckles on your back—"

Billy groaned, smacking at his hand. "—get off me or *get me off*, you *sadistic fucking tease*."

"Guys," Will huffed. Steve felt the book smack his shoulder. "You're *missing* it."

"Oh no," Steve whispered into Billy's side, and he kicked, squirming. "I'm just *talking*— you crawled into my lap, take your punishment like a *man*, Hargrove—"

"Fucking—*tickles*—*Harrington!*"

Will groaned. "I'm going to skip to Bree. We're meeting Steve there, so *pay attention*."

"Why are you *doing* this to me—" Billy rolled backwards to try and squish Steve's face, but Steve pushed himself back upright, grinning down. Billy reached up and pushed Steve's grinning face away, then flailed to grab a pillow and drop it over his crotch. "I'll talk, I'll talk, whatever you want—laugh it up over there, dickless," he shot over at Will. "Talk to me after you hit puberty—"

Will threw another pillow at him. "*Guys.*" He crawled over to lean against Steve's side, and folded his arms.

"Yeah, our child is *right here*, Harrington," Billy growled. "Keep your hands to yourself."

Will giggled, leaning to bump his shoulder into Steve's arm. "Come on, pay attention." He started to read again, and Steve moved the nintendo controller away from where Billy's curls were starting to claim it for the Kingdom of Hargrove. He stroked through them, and Billy looked up to meet his eyes, flushed, and smirked, turning his head into the crook of Steve's knee. Steve ran his thumb over rapidly-reddening freckles, and Billy grabbed his hands, holding them to either side of his head, mouthing '*Stop*'.

'*Sorry,*' Steve mouthed back, tugging at his hands, but Billy squeezed tighter, glaring up. Steve bit his lips together, trying to think about something that wasn't how empty his house would be after Billy left, or how empty his house would be if Billy saw his father coming, and walked out the door and into the man's car. He tried to focus on Will's voice, the story of, apparently, children drunk at a bar, dancing on tables, and threatened by a hobo, and then realized Billy was silently laughing into his leg.

"Let Steve read," Billy grinned up. "He's starting to rock in place, give him something to do that isn't *petting* me."

"Eugh," Will groaned. "*Fine.*"

Steve accepted the book, cleared his throat, and continued the adventures of Froggo—

"*Frodo*—" Will corrected.

“Sandwich Gimpy—”

“Do it *right*, Steve!” Will hit him with a pillow, and Steve sank the hand not holding the book into Billy’s curls, grinning.

“Fine. So these children ran away from home, and now they’re drunk —”

“They’re *grown-ups*! They’re *Hobbits*!” Will gasped.

“—some homeless dude at the motel yelled at them—”

“—it’s not a *motel*!”

“—and now he’s telling them the forces of darkness will be fooled by pillows under their blankets? Nice.”

Billy muffled sniggers against Steve’s jeans.

Will was staring at him in open-mouthed horror, and Steve fought to keep a straight face. “What happened to that stoned hippie character they met in the woods? After they spent the night in the haunted graveyard.”

“*T-Tom Bombadil*,” Will squeaked, and Billy’s shoulders shook harder. “He’s a *nature spirit*— and don’t call *Aragorn son of Arathorn* ‘some homeless dude’!”

“He is *clearly described* as some homeless dude,” Billy put in, and Steve nodded.

“Yeah, he’s an angry hobo.”

“In a bar, no less,” Billy added, cackling as Will scrambled for a pillow and whacked him with it. “He probably smells *great*.”

“Shut up, shut *up*!” Will giggled, smacking the pillow at whichever bit of either of them he could reach.

Steve leaned closer over Billy, shielding him with his arm and shoulders, and Billy watched his face, swallowing, then turned on his side again, grabbing the pillow away from Will and holding it over

his head. Steve blinked down, wanting to pull the pillow away, or lean to see what he was hiding, but he cleared his throat, and returned to reading, sitting on his other hand.

He half paid attention to the kids in the Will's book buying a pony, and finding out their wizard babysitter was wildly irresponsible. "Wait, he was supposed to meet them, didn't show up for *months*, and now he's missing? He should *not* be asked to babysit anymore—" and deciding to travel with the hobo—"What, he's a king hobo?"

"He's not a hobo!" Will smacked the back of his head. "He's a king!"

"King of nothing, sounds like," Billy snorted.

"Like me, I guess," Steve risked freeing his hand—it was falling asleep—and tapped Billy's elbow on the way to patting his shoulder through the pillow.

Billy tensed, then relaxed again, huffing a laugh. "Stevagorn, son of Stevathorn?"

"My sword is not *busted*," Steve grumbled back, and Billy cackled into his knee. Steve smirked, ignoring Will's groan. "My sword is *fine*, I swear, just give me a minute, this usually *never happens*—" His jeans felt hot where Billy was silently wheezing with laughter.

"I think they make drugs for that," he whispered, and Steve bit back a snort. "Get your 'sword' pointing, uh, north again. It's okay, Harrington, it happens to everyone. Except me."

Steve snorted. "Of course."

"He gets a good sword," Will rolled his eyes. "We meet Billy soon, come *on*."

"Funny how this Tolkien guy knew us," Billy muttered, tossing the pillow at Will, and grabbing Steve's hand to hold against his chest. "Who's Nancy, then?"

"Right? She's an elf!" Will flopped to lie against Billy's back, and Steve felt him startle. "I'm Frodo, because—"

“Hey, Byers, don’t just slam into him, okay, don’t just—grab him or—stuff,” Steve interrupted, and Billy snorted.

“What? Sorry?” Will sat up on his elbow, and Billy groaned into Steve’s jeans, burying his face.

“Shut up, *Harrington*, it’s fine, I’m not—I’m not fucking *scared of Will Byers*—”

Steve grinned, ruffling Will’s hair. “Yeah, no biggie, just *don’t*. Who’s Lucas, Will? Which...*hobbit*.”

“Uh,” Will blinked wide eyes at him, and Steve raised his eyebrows. “Yeah, okay, um. Lucas says he doesn’t care, but if he has to be anybody it’s Merry, because he’s the only one with any goddamn sense.” Once the floodgates were opened, Will took them through a recitation of *everyone they knew* as compared to a Lord of the Rings character, down to his science teacher as some moth-summoning wizard, and Joyce Byers as queen of the elves.

When he started to wind down, Steve started reading again. He stuck his tongue out the side of his mouth as he carefully turned the page one-handed, and narrated on. Will leaned over to get whispered permission to thunk against Billy’s back again, and Steve’s hand started tingling again as Billy squeezed it too hard.

When the timer went off on the lasagna, Steve was reading about the suspiciously familiar group of tiny idiots being herded across a river by their lost wizard (who he pictured, privately, as Hopper). Billy rolled to his feet, leaned in for a quick smooch, and then loped off to the kitchen. Will grinned at the side of Steve’s head, and Steve felt like a dad on TV, who ought to continue to read his newspaper while his wife cooked, but decided to be a better-than-shitty boyfriend instead. He tried to stay out of Billy’s way, and set the table.

Billy sat the lasagna pan across the burners, and stopped to stare out the window. “I do kinda miss the water.”

Steve dropped his handful of silverware in the center of the table,

and came up behind him to slide his arms around Billy's waist, kissing his neck. "...the beach?"

"Used to surf," Billy sighed, letting Steve sway them together.

Steve bit his lips together, thinking, then went back to the mark he was making on Billy's neck. He ran his teeth over it, and then tightened his grip around Billy's ribs, laughing at the sudden weight of swearing Billy against him.

"Fuck you, Harrington," he muttered, flushing.

"Y'know there's lots of white water rafting around here," Steve licked his neck, grinning, and let Billy grab his hair and shove him away, "—it's not surfing, but it's *water*, it's fast—"

"You should go on a date," Will prompted, from the doorway. "Go river rafting."

"...yeah, maybe not in February," Steve leaned away from the spatula Billy flailed at him, then dodged around the table, "—not in a *river* —"

"I dunno, I think a dunk in cold water would do you some *good*," Billy snarled at the lasagna.

"It's probably like the book, actually, all the white water." Will plonked himself into a chair, bouncing.

Steve nodded. "Wizards in rubber rafts, elves in lifejackets—"

"Shut up," Will laughed. "Now *I* wanna go."

"You'd probably like it." Steve leaned to catch Billy's eye, and watched him glance over, and then growl at the plates he was serving up. "It's kinda *fast* and *rough*, y'know—"

Billy turned to bury his head in his arms against the counter and groan, and Steve laughed so hard he started wheezing, as Will frowned between them, narrow-eyed.

By the time Will finished his lasagna, he was bouncing in place, ready to snatch Billy's plate and dance around Steve's chair until he surrendered *his*, and usher them back to the drudgery of elves.

Steve leaned to groan into Billy's shoulder. "Maybe we'll all get laryngitis," he whispered, and felt Billy's laugh more than heard it. Will was clattering around with the plates, and Steve leapt up to take over, and suggest they get reading while he did the dishes. *Anything to have it over*, he thought, grimacing as Billy derailed into songs that referenced elves and wizards, and he and Will gathered around the stereo again. *Like he sounds happy so often*, Steve rolled his eyes at himself. *Nah, I'm just here wishing he'd shut up and pay attention to me. I'm such a nice guy. Just the best. God, no wonder Nancy thinks I'm bullshit.*

"Book Billy" was introduced, some knight named Boromir who, according to Will, basically wanted to grab the evil jewelry and raise his middle fingers at the rest of the world.

"Sounds about right," Steve muttered, drying the plates, putting them away, and leaning against the counter for a long moment wondering whether to intrude. As the chapter continued (sporadically, between songs), a bunch of dudes at a table got a history lesson about some evil empire, and he thought Nancy would probably enjoy this too. *Smart fucking brunettes.*

He sighed, reminded by the descriptions of some elf fighting huge spiders that he didn't want any pony-sized arachnids in his house, and got out the duster.

"...are you *cleaning house*?" Billy stopped to stare, and Steve shrugged.

"I can hear you guys fine."

"It's *Saturday*," Will threw a pillow, missing Steve by about two yards, "*—come back.*"

"You need help?" Billy offered, leaning back on his elbows so his unzipped sweatshirt slid open.

Steve shook his head, but wandered over to kiss the side of his head. "I got it, honey bun." Billy grabbed his sleeve, yanking him back down and leaning against his shoulder. His sweatshirt was another one of Steve's, and Steve tried not to grin, liking *something* about the idea of something of *his* keeping Billy Hargrove cozy and warm.

"Guys," Will hissed, as Steve leaned in for a kiss. Billy closed his eyes, sitting up into it, and Will stood, clearing his throat. "Uh, I can go take a bath, or—just—just go upstairs—I guess—"

"Nah, it's fine," Steve pulled back, disentangling Billy's hands from his shirt. Billy held on to his *hands*, frowning upward, so Steve pushed him onto his back, pressed kisses all over his fingers and swung a leg over him to kneel with his knees to either side of Billy's chest. "Go 'head and read," he whispered, leaning in to kiss Billy's grin.

Billy slid his arms up around Steve's neck, and Steve grinned into the kiss, bracing his arms on either side of Billy's head.

"Lemme go. I'll let you get back to finding that ring somebody dropped in the river," he whispered into Billy's mustache.

"Comfy right here," Billy whispered back, and Will cleared his throat, trotting off to rummage with something in the kitchen. Billy slid his hands over Steve's shoulders, then up the sides of his neck, pulling him into another kiss.

Of course kissing somebody hot while half on top of them had Steve's dick enthusiastically wanting to come off the bench and join the game, so he grabbed Billy's hands and kissed them again, squeezing Billy's wrists together with one hand and pushing himself up and away with the other.

When Will stuck his face cautiously around the edge of the doorway, Billy'd gotten hold of the pocket in Steve's jeans, and yanked him back down, curling around him as Steve cackled, batting at his hands. Billy crawled back into the fort, hauling Steve by whatever he could reach, and laid half on top of him, throwing his leg over Steve's flailing ones. He just wriggled closer when Steve tried to escape, waving Will over, and Will finally sighed and sat in a pile of pillows

with his legs across theirs. “I got the chocolates. I’m just gonna *sit* on you, okay, that’s what my mom does when we fight—”

“Feed me some chocolate, asshole,” Steve muttered into Billy’s shoulder, after trying to free a hand. At least getting a chocolate would mean his hands off *Steve*, instead of stroking up and down his side, like he was fanning the heat running through Steve’s veins. Steve found himself actually missing *Tommy*, and his annoying habit of just putting on porn and jacking it in Steve’s front room, without asking first whether maybe Steve had anyone over. *I could do with some privacy and some porn*, he thought to himself with a huff, blowing Billy’s curls out of his face. *I bet Tommy isn’t returning mine, either. Dickhead.*

Billy leaned one arm across Steve’s forearms—Steve swore, kicking—and leaned back to rummage in the box, returning with a chocolate he rubbed along Steve’s lips.

“Fuck you,” Steve panted, after trying to grab it with his tongue, and mostly just licking Billy’s fingers.

Billy stared at his mouth, and brought the chocolate around for another pass, so Steve bit him. Billy rocked back, overturning the box of chocolates, and Steve grabbed at them to press both his advantage, and a handful of chocolates and their paper cups into Billy’s face.

Billy flailed back, yelled “Shit!”, and kicked out, and Steve scrambled away to snatch up his cleaning rags. The chocolates had rained over Will, and he sighed, dumping handfuls back in the box.

“—I need a shower,” Billy rolled to his feet, and jogged upstairs.

Will wrinkled his nose, watching him go, and Steve stopped dusting to think.

“I...’ll be back in a sec.”

“Oh my god, gross,” Will moaned as he ran out.

When Steve ran upstairs, Billy was leaving his own room and heading to Steve’s with an armload of clothes. “Hey—”

“Fuck off,” Billy muttered, elbowing around him. “My stuff’s in your shower.”

“Okay...” Steve blinked at his hunched shoulders. “Sorry? Oh, no, wait. Can I, uh, get something from your room?”

“What?! Your goddamn room. Whatever.”

“It’s not, it’s—”

Billy kicked the door to Steve’s bedroom shut after him, and Steve trailed off, then shrugged, pulling the crumpled note with Billy’s mom’s number out of his pocket, ducking into Billy’s room, and locking the door behind him.

The phone rang for a long time. Maybe. What with Billy thudding angrily around in the shower, any time might seem long, Steve figured. Finally, a woman picked up.

“Uh, hello,” Steve paced around the floor, staring at the note in his hand like it would be reasonable to read her own number to her over the line.

“...Billy?” she whispered, and he stopped, one foot half in the air. “Billy, honey, no, you know you can’t call here, not until your birthday—”

“My name’s Steve Harrington, ma’am,” he cut her off, because she sounded sniffly, like she might have started to cry. “I’m Billy’s, uh, friend. Can you talk to *me*?”

“What?” Her lungs made a squeaky noise, and Steve grabbed the phone with both hands, like an idiot. *Even if she was here, she wouldn’t want some guy grabbing at her*, he told himself, snorting a laugh. *Shit, she cries as easily as he does.*

“I’m Billy’s friend from school—”

“Did something *happen*?!” she hiccuped into what sounded like wheezing, and Steve flailed a hand, stomping in a circle.

“He’s fine! He’s great! I mean, he’s—he’s okay, ma’am, please don’t

—I'm sorry—”

She sniffled again, and took a deep breath. “S-Steve, you said?”

“Yes! Steve Harrington! He’s—shit, what do you want to know? You can’t *talk* to him?!”

“...I’m not sure I should talk to you either,” she cleared her throat. “Doesn’t sound like he tells you much.”

“Uh,” Steve grimaced out the window, trying to distill his history with Billy Hargrove into something his mother would want to hear. “Um, just—his dad just told him you left. Uh, he doesn’t know you aren’t supposed to talk to him, he thinks—”

“What,” her voice shook, cracking into hoarseness. “Neil—just—he thinks—”

“So you *want* to talk to him?”

“Of course I *want to talk to him*,” she hissed into the phone, and Steve scrabbled at his hair as he paced, because now it sounded like she was suppressing sobs. “That —Neil—”

“Why the hell did you *marry* that—” Steve flopped backwards on the bed, rubbing his face. “He’s—Billy’s—staying with me—”

“What?!”

“You know his *dad*,” Steve growled back. “He’s here. He wants to go home to California. But he thinks you don’t want him, so—”

There was a thunk at the door, and Steve realized the shower had shut off at some point. “...why’s my door locked, Harrington.”

“He told him I don’t *want him*?” she snarled back, and he felt relief swelling his lungs. “Wait, *home* to California? Where the hell is he?”

The door thudded so hard it creaked in its frame. “Whatcha doin’ in there, *Harrington*,” Billy yelled.

“That’s him, isn’t it—he doesn’t know you’re calling,” she whispered.

“He thinks you wouldn’t want him to,” Steve gritted back, listening to her tears, but also aware of Neil Hargrove’s entire being. “You left him with his *dad*. So you *do* wanna see him.” Another bang came at the door, like Billy’d kicked it.

The weight of the thudding sounded like Billy was actually going to break the door *down*, and Steve plugged that ear, trying to hear her, then yelled “Shove it, Hargrove, gimme a goddamn minute,” and the pounding stopped.

“What is Neil *doing*,” she whispered, then, “—shit, shit, I have to—I have to get to work, I have to—call me later...Steve Harrington. I think—I think we need to talk, call back, okay, I can’t—I can’t be in contact with him, but this needs to—call tomorrow. Call me tomorrow. *Shit*.” Steve winced as she slammed the phone down.

Billy’d gone quiet outside, and when Steve unlocked the door, he didn’t come in. Steve stuck his head out, warily, to see him leaning against the banister, gaze on the trees outside the window. “You needed to use the phone without me hearing,” he huffed a laugh. “My room, huh? I thought—”

“Sorry.” Steve stepped closer, hands up like he’d dropped a weapon.

“What’d I do. Was it Hopper, or—or my *dad*—”

“No, no, it’s not—nothing like that—” *Shit, of course she didn’t say she wanted to see him, she didn’t say why she hasn’t—I can guess, but if I say I talked to her, found out nothing, and she sounded real sad he’s gonna feed me my teeth.*

“Was it Nancy.” Billy swallowed, rubbing his face.

“—y-yeah. It was Nancy,” Steve nodded, and Billy folded his arms, leaning his face in them.

“Shit. You can just—you can tell me to fuck off. You don’t have to lock me out—”

“Crap. Sorry.” Steve ran a hand up Billy’s shoulder, and when he leaned into it, up and down his back.

“You getting back with her?”

“No! No, it was, uh, about Will, y’know.”

“...so you locked me out?” Billy’s skin was still flushed from the shower, Steve figured, but his eyes were suspiciously glassy. “I’m always the one *there*, with Will, don’t try to—”

“No, I called her before, from the IHOP. That’s who I was talking to. Outside.”

“When you were being sweet to me in the IHOP.” Billy dropped his head in his arms again. “Had to check in with Nancy first. She give you good advice?”

“Kinda gave me confidence, y’know.” Steve leaned against the banister next to him, feeling on safer ground.

“Yeah, of course that wasn’t me,” Billy laughed, pushing himself up, and wiping his face. “Fuck. Of fucking course.” He shoved by, stomped into his room, and Steve could hear him blowing his nose. When he pushed the door open again, Billy’d flopped backwards on the bed to stare at the ceiling.

“Hey,” Steve nudged Billy’s leg with his foot, “—come on. Don’t freak out about who was better at the gay sex talk. Nancy wasn’t even there. You were perfect.”

Billy laughed, and got up, grabbing Steve’s elbow as he stalked by, and dragging him towards the stairs. When they finally made it to the fort—since Steve had to lean in a few times and kiss Billy’s face, and get batted away—Will narrowed his eyes at them, and handed Billy the book.

“Ha, Will thinks you cause more trouble than I do.” Steve kissed him again, enjoying the contrast between mustache and freshly-shaven skin, but dodged away from the grabby hand flailing at his belt loops.

“Do you guys *have* to keep *doing* that,” Will groaned, trying to

reorganize the box of chocolates by the included map. “Can’t you just *tell* me, and I’ll go for a walk, or—”

“Harrington’s too sexy for that,” Billy licked his thumb, turning the page, and Steve threw a dusty rag at him, “—I can’t keep my animal impulses in check—” He threw the rag back, and Steve dodged, flipping him off.

“Gross!” Will giggled. “You’re more fun than Jonathan and Nancy.” Billy and Steve both went still. “I mean, they don’t, you know, they’re trying so hard.” Billy started reading again before he finished his sentence, and Will leaned to thump into his shoulder. “I mean, you guys aren’t all *nervous*, it’s just like you’re friends.”

“Friends with *animal impulses*,” Steve slid around the edge of the fort and tackled Billy to the bed, dropping solidly along his body, and wrapping an arm around him.

“Oof,” Billy let the book fall over his face, “—I don’t think he wants us to do that here, Harrington.”

“Mmm.” Steve let his head rest against Billy’s warm shoulder, feeling the vibration of his voice. “I mean, we *aren’t* tryin’ as hard. He’s already seen me wandering around like a freak at three in the morning, with a bat, he knows what I’m like.”

Billy snorted. “You don’t exactly have to dress black tie, for me.”

“I mean, I *would*,” Steve propped his chin up on his folded arms, and Billy kicked at him, grinning. “I’d throw on a tux. Take you out—and I know you get all dolled up for *me*—” He reached out to brush his thumb along some freckles, and Billy bit at his fingers. “—it’s actually kinda neat to see you, y’know. Chill out.”

“I do not get *dolled up*,” Billy growled. “What is it with you and freckles—”

“You’re always checking your reflection,” Will grinned, “—*both* of you.”

“My hair’s my best feature,” Steve grumbled into Billy’s chest, and Billy cracked up, dropping the book to wrap both arms around him,

and rolling them to the side, away from Will.

“You trying to look pretty for me?” he whispered against Steve’s neck, and Steve sighed.

“I mean, probably you’d still dump me if I, like, grew a patchy beard—wore bellbottoms—”

Billy snickered into his neck, hugging him a little too hard.

“You lost our *place*,” Will groaned, flipping through the book. As he started reading again, Steve’s eyes started drifting shut.

When he jerked awake, he was flat on his back, mouth open and dry, and patting next to him did not reveal Billy Hargrove.

“He’s out having a smoke,” Will sighed, and Steve’s lungs unstitched themselves and worked properly.

“I’m just,” he mumbled, stumbling upright, squinting at the door, and listing toward it in a unintentional crescent step pattern to fumble with the knob. It rattled, defying him.

“You do that,” Will muttered.

Billy was out by the pool, sitting in a lawn chair he’d tipped back on two legs, and Steve stopped and groaned into his hands, the chill in the air waking his brain. “I don’t know why I’m out here,” he muttered, rubbing his face. “God.” The snow crunched under his shoes as he turned around and tromped back toward the stairs.

“King Steve!” Billy shouted. “Harrington!” Steve turned around at the sound of crunching footsteps behind him. Billy was standing a few feet back, rubbing his arms up and down his sleeves. He flipped the stub of his cigarette away, blowing the last cloud of smoke into his fingers.

“...what?” Steve asked, and stomped in the snow, shivering.

“No idea.” Billy stepped closer, watching his face. “What’s wrong?”

"It's stupid." Steve shrugged. "Just woke up dumb. Y'know."

"More than usual?"

"Thanks, asshole," Steve snorted. "Come on, it's cold."

"Did you...want to ask me something, or..." Billy cocked his head, stepping closer.

"Nah," Steve reached up to fix his hair, "—I didn't want anything, I don't even know why I'm out here."

"...I can think of a few ways to spend time," Billy laughed, wagging his tongue, and Steve rolled his eyes.

"Oh, yeah, out here in the snow, that's totally what I wanted. Nah, I just woke up and—" He waved a hand.

"...I told Will where I was going," Billy narrowed his eyes, "—just wanted a smoke."

"It's *dumb*, okay, I just—" Steve clapped his hands to his cheeks, suddenly the warmest part of his body. "I just wanted to see you, I wasn't—I don't need anything. It doesn't make any sense, okay—"

"...what." Billy walked up so close they would have bumped chests, if Steve hadn't stepped back.

"I'm kinda dumb and clingy," Steve turned back to the house, snickering. "I used to get lonesome and climb in Nancy's window. I know you're leaving and I'm just, like, the owner of a free couch—"

Billy shoved him back around and grabbed his face. "...you—you idiot," he stared, holding Steve's jaw with cupped hands. "You—you fucking *moron*, you—"

"That's what I'm *saying*, *jesus*," Steve laughed, ending in a muffled curse as Billy kissed him, and kissed him *again*, and then yanked him close with one arm crushing his ribs, and the other fisted a little too tightly in his hair. Steve cautiously hugged him back. "The *hair*, dude, don't scalp me—"

Billy's fingers loosened—slightly. “You *dumbass*. You—how are you in *school*. How do you *drive*. Did a brick fall on your head as a child. Did you stick your face so far in eating Nancy out you couldn't get oxygen. Are you *brain-damaged*.”

“Yeah, probably,” Steve rolled his eyes, “—does it—”

“Shut up, idiot—okay,” Billy took a shaky breath, “—okay, you—you wanna keep everyone safe, right. I'm—we're, like, you *know* me now, you just want—” He squeezed tighter, voice cracking, and his fingers dug in to Steve's ribs. “I can—I can do it. I'll do it, okay. I'll—avoid him. Somehow. I'll lock up, I won't let him in. I'll try to get upstairs. Won't—” he swallowed, “—I won't get in his car. I'll—I can—wait for you. That's what you *want*, right—”

Steve's heart had started pounding when Billy grabbed him and kissed him, stumbling over his words, and he'd had a vague, kind of—in hindsight—*hilarious* idea of where Billy was headed. *I'll let you get between me and my scary dad* sure wasn't it, and he cocked his head as Billy pulled back to survey his face.

Billy laughed. “Shit. *Damn* it. Of course that wasn't it, I'm getting it wrong. Again. What do you—” He shut up as Steve wedged his arm between them, cupping Billy's jaw to put a thumb over his mouth.

“No, wait. Stop—stop there. Shut up, Hargrove, it's good. You're good.”

“I'm *good*,” Billy snorted.

“That's good,” Steve pulled their foreheads together, holding the back of Billy's head with both hands, and staring him down. “That's more important. You're *important*. Good. Good—good job. If something happens, *wait* for me.”

“Okay,” Billy whispered, closing his eyes. “Yeah.” He huffed a laugh, but his shoulders slumped a little, letting Steve press their heads together. “Wait for you.”

“Get away from him, go upstairs—”

“Fair warning,” Billy laughed, clenching him painfully close again. “I

lock that front door on him and I—I'm not climbing any stairs, that's for sure. You'll find me just inside that door in a pile of shoes. Probably—probably *pissing myself*, christ."

Steve opened his mouth to argue, and clocked Billy's repeated swallows, and cold sweat. "...he doesn't know you're here. Try to—at least—try to get where you can't hear him, okay."

"Yeah," Billy nodded against his head, shivering, and Steve pulled him closer, into a kiss. Billy turned his head, opening his mouth easily, but Steve kept it soft and sweet, just wanting to take some warmth, and press it into Billy's skin.

"Okay," he whispered. "You ready to go back inside?"

"What'd you really want me to say," Billy whispered back.

"No, you're good. You're—" Steve swallowed, his throat unexpectedly raw, "—you're fine. You're—perfect, you're great. It's—be safe, Hargrove. Just—be okay, that's—that's plenty, that's enough."

Billy laughed, pulling back to wipe his eyes. "Anything you want, your majesty. You *sure* there's nothing—"

"Nope," Steve threw his arm around Billy's shoulders, "—no, nope, that's—that's better, Jesus. Let's get back inside. Come on. Chocolate."

Billy made the hot chocolate while Will helped Steve finish up the dusting—*how am I supposed to stay awake, if I'm done cleaning*, Steve wondered—and then Will forced him to surrender the Windex, and Steve allowed himself to be shoved into the fort.

"You're tidier than *Nancy's* mom," Will told him, wide-eyed, and Steve snorted into his hot chocolate.

"Gotta clean it if I wanna keep it." He shrugged, and Billy glanced around, eyes narrowed.

He opened his mouth for the heart-shaped chocolate Steve pressed against it, then wrinkled his nose as cherry goo flooded his mouth, and glared. "Mmf. Eugh. They—god, it's like sugar snot, Harrington, you *shitsucker*. They won't let you live here if you don't clean?"

"Oh, no, I mean, not exactly," Steve said, shaking his head, and studying the chocolate map for another landmine, "—they just wanna know I can take care of myself, y'know—"

"You can't," Billy said flatly, dodging another chocolate. When Steve got up to get the dishes, though, both Trespassers pitched in, and he caught Will carefully organizing the shoes by the door.

Steve sat up in bed, cheeks and exposed arms numb with cold, heart thudding. He squinted around at the Christmas lights of the fort, rubbing his face as he took in the burrito-lump that was Will on his right, and most of the covers, and the empty space to his left. He patted it, and the sheets were cool. He'd forbidden the thermostat to both Williams, but crawled to the end of the mattress and out to raise it, blinking through the dim to try and avoid all the moved furniture.

Billy was a lump at the kitchen table, securely wrapped in afghan, his hands around a steaming mug.

Steve turned up the heat, rubbing his arms, and wandered in to his line of vision. "What's my heater doing in the kitchen?"

"—here," Billy slid the mug towards him, and got up to open the cupboard.

"...I don't need to steal your drink," Steve grinned up, and shivered. "I could share it."

Billy turned back to assess him, then came back over and sat down. Steve scooted closer, pulling an edge of the afghan over, and leaning against Billy's warm side and shoulder. His eyes started to drift shut again.

Billy watched. "...the fuck d'you do that," he asked, his voice

exhausted and gravelly.

Steve had been about to comment on the clock, which read two-thirty-eight in the morning, or that Billy'd obviously been awake a while, so he squinted back, lifting the mug to inhale a familiar mix of marshmallows, candy cane, chocolate, and coffee. "Huh?"

Billy leaned their heads together, his breath warm against Steve's cheek. "*This*."

"Shit," Steve jerked away, laughing, "—fuck. Sorry—"

Billy yanked him back in, rubbing his stubble against Steve's jaw, and Steve snickered, trying to shove him away without waking Will.

"—*stop*—the fuck are you doing, you *dickhead*—"

"Shut up, you know you'll cry without me," Billy said, stubble-burning his flailing forearms, and Steve tried to suppress cackles.

"Fuck you, man, I'll fucking stop—" Steve squeaked as Billy turned to hold him close with *both* arms, switching to *licking* his struggling hands. The chairs under them creaked as Steve leaned away, squirming, and trying not to laugh, and Billy pulled him closer.

"Poor lonely Harrington," Billy whispered, biting his arm, and Steve pushed at his face, kicking at his chair and trying to hold his breath against giggles. "Gonna tape a picture of me to your pillow? Hug it every night?"

"Stop it," Steve hissed back, grinning, and pushing the imagery to the back of his mind. "Stop licking me with your stink tongue, *Hargrove* —"

The mug of hot chocolate jostled, and they both froze, before Billy's smirk turned into sniggers. He leaned into Steve's shoulder, relaxing his arms into a hug.

"So you really don't want me to *stop*," Steve whispered in his ear, grabbing the mug and taking a sip.

"Never said I wanted you to sit three feet away and fucking—stare at

me like a hungry dog,” Billy snorted into his shoulder, and Steve seriously considered dumping the hot chocolate down his back.

“Pretty sure I wasn’t doing that.” He rolled his eyes, but slid his fingers through Billy’s curls, sipping the hot chocolate and squinting through the holes in the afghan to try and read the clock on the microwave. “You stare at people, they start scooting away. Nancy used to—”

“But I’m a *friend*, right,” Billy laughed softly. “Bet you do this with all your friends. Bet you sleep in Tommy’s lap.”

“Maybe when we were like *six*.” Steve cocked his head to try and bite a piece off the top of the candy cane. “Not sure you know what friends are like, Hargrove—”

“Yeah, you *noticed*,” Billy snorted. “Not really *friend material*—”

“Wha?” Steve stuck his tongue out the side of his mouth to try and capture the candy cane without pulling his other hand out of Billy’s curls.

“What, you think I had *friends*?”

“*I like you*.” Steve felt his cheeks heat. He got his teeth on the candy cane, and crunched.

“Yeah, well, took me a while to grow up and get sexy.”

“...no, I mean, uh, you *are*, but—”

Billy leaned into Steve’s fingers in his hair. “I’m saying once I got fuckable people didn’t mind having me around so much, Harrington. I’m not *nice*.”

“...pictured you as cute.” Steve squinted, thinking, and sucked on the half candy cane in his mouth, burying his face in Billy’s hair to breathe him in. “The curls, maybe.”

“Maybe if I hadn’t been fucking feral,” Billy snorted, pulling his legs up to lean more of his weight into Steve. “Fucking—I fucking picked up a kid’s desk once and *threw* it. He was still *sitting* in it. Just sitting

there being a little asshole until I came along.”

Steve clenched his fingers in curls, hugging him closer. “...how did nobody make sure you were *okay*.”

“They were making sure *he* was okay, Harrington. He got *thrown*. It was like a car crash, he landed on all these other desks—”

“No, yeah, but—”

“So this is what *friends* are like,” Billy sniggered.

“I know I’m weird, alright, you can tell me to fuck off.”

“You’re a goddamn pain in the ass,” Billy groaned into his neck.

“*Already*, you’re a pain in the ass, just *do* it, I’d be easier to put up with, right, just *fuck* me.”

“*I’m* a pain in the ass?” Steve nearly choked, finished chewing the hunk of candy cane, and took a swig of hot chocolate. He cleared his throat. “*Me*. I’m the one making things weird.”

“...you don’t have to *think* so hard about it,” Billy muttered into his shoulder. “I’m *easy*, Harrington, just—”

“You are *anything* but easy!” Steve hissed back, and Billy laughed, clenching his fingers in the back of Steve’s shirt. Steve thonked the mug back on the table, and wrapped his other arm around Billy’s shoulders. Under the afghan, Billy’s shirt was a weird mix of sleep-warm and cold where the gaps between squares had let the air through. “*I’m* a pain in the ass?” Steve hissed. “Have you *looked in a goddamn mirror*.” He stroked his thumb through the warm hair at the back of Billy’s head, where the weight of his curls pulled it straight. “Other than to fucking *admire* yourself. Christ. You’re more trouble than the whole Goonie posse, I swear to god. At least I can keep them safe with a *bat*. *Easy*, Jesus. You’re the farthest thing from easy —”

Billy was cackling into the neck of Steve’s t-shirt. “Sorry, your majesty.” He’d wedged himself half onto Steve’s lap, his legs off to the side, slumping against Steve’s shoulder and neck, as Steve tried to get both thighs under what felt like six tons of muscled ass cutting off

the circulation in his arteries.

He strained, half-lifting Billy's heavy butt with a hug, so he could shift against the hard edge of the chair. "God, you weigh a fuck ton, they're gonna have to amputate my legs, you *dipshit*," he muttered, hugging Billy tighter, and feeling him shake with laughter. "Look. Seriously. *Hargrove*. I'm not weird enough I couldn't hide it for a *few hours*." Steve wanted to push away and pace, flailing, so he contented himself petting Billy's hair like he was a cat, pushing at his head. Billy snickered harder, and Steve felt the hands in his shirt grip tighter. "I could get anybody in our *school* over here if I got on the phone. I could have a party here in *minutes*, you—you *shithead*. I could get laid in an *hour*, tops—"

"You sound like such a prick," Billy sniggered into his neck.

"—and it'd all be *easier than you*, you—you *asshole fuckface*, *jesus*. *Easy*. The fuck do you think easy is?" Steve trailed off into a softer whisper. "It's not you. God. Nothing about you is easy. Nothing about your *life* is making my life easy, you're—you're like I saw a—a *hurricane* and opened the door, come *on* in, make my life messier—"

"Probably shouldn't do that," Billy snorted. "It's kinda—"

"Shut up," Steve muffled a laugh in his hair. "I can—I can have a hurricane if I want to. Fucking *stop me*. You're not my mom." Billy's shoulders shook as he laughed breathlessly. Steve raised his eyebrows at the familiar humid warmth. "Not the hurricane's fault it's kinda...wet."

"Shut the hell up, I'm not crying," Billy huffed, sniffing.

"Fucking—floods everywhere," Steve pulled him closer. "*Easy*. *Jesus*."

"I said *easier*—" Billy hissed, digging his nails into Steve's back.

Steve slid his hand up Billy's shirt, lifting the edge to expose his side to the frosty air of the kitchen. Billy squirmed, hissing as he retracted his claws, and Steve smoothed his hand over the shivering skin of Billy's side before pulling the afghan more securely around

them.

Billy groaned into his shoulder. “—I know what I’m *like*, Jesus, Harrington, I’m just saying—if you’d just—”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up,” Steve whispered back. “That’s gross, stop it. Nasty. I’m not fucking—*jizzing in you* to make my life easier, stop *saying* that shit. If—if I wanted *easy* you wouldn’t be here, I want *you*.”

Billy made a soft wheezy whining noise in the back of his throat—and *bit* Steve’s shoulder. He took a shaky breath, and swallowed. “I—I don’t think that came out how you *meant*, Harrington—”

“*I want you here*,” Steve smacked his shoulder, but wrapped both arms around him, forcing himself to swallow through his dry throat. “I fucking want you here, it doesn’t need to be easier, I want you. Here. If you were easy you wouldn’t *be* you, you’re not easy. It’s—it’s *fine*, it’s fucking fine, stop—stop saying gross shit about treating you like you’re—like a *blow up doll*. And don’t *bite* me, you’re so *nuts*, Jesus fucking Christ—”

“Sorry I’m *not* easy, then, I guess,” Billy huffed a laugh, breathing against Steve’s wet t-shirt.

“I’m not. Shut up. You—you’re Billy Hargrove, so you’re fine. *Billy Hargrove* is fine.” He squeezed tighter, steadying himself. “I don’t—I *like*—you’re *messy as fuck*, but it’s not—you’re just a mess ‘cause of your goddamn *dad*.” Sometime in the previous sentences, Steve had gone hoarse, and his eyes were burning.

Billy swallowed against his neck. “...hey, now, if it weren’t for my *goddamn dad*, you’d be all alone in this big empty house. You wouldn’t have—”

“If it weren’t for your *fucking dad*,” Steve cut him off, “—you wouldn’t be so goddamn hard to make *friends* with.” Billy took a deep breath, and Steve reached up to slide his hand over what he could get at of Billy’s mouth. “Shut it, just—just shut up, sorry, I know—I know he’s got you convinced he’s great and you’re shit, but I don’t wanna hear it. I like you, I don’t wanna hear you talk all the

shit he says. Just—just don't try to fuck me like you're disarming a bomb. I don't wanna fuck anybody who thinks that—"

"Shit," Billy lifted his head. "Harrington—"

"I know you don't—" Steve laughed, swallowing, and Billy grabbed his head and pulled it against *his* shoulder. Steve took a shaky breath. "I know I'm—I'm the woods, for you."

"What?" Billy scraped his nails up the nape of Steve's neck.

"...uh—okay, shit, that feels good," Steve mumbled, derailed.

"*Yeah* it fucking does."

Steve remembered his *point*. "—I just—I mean, I *know* E—uh, they closed the hole, to—to the other place, the Upside-Down. There aren't monsters coming out, the woods are fine, there's nothing out there. I still have to go *check*. If the phone rings when I'm asleep I think everyone's *dead*, I mean, I know they're not dead, but—" he groaned into Billy's shoulder, half annoyed at the general slipperiness of words, half enthralled at the feeling of Billy's warm callused thumb rubbing the join between his neck and jaw, and up behind his ear. "And—it's just—you *know* I won't hit you with the bat, I mean. But like—if you're startled, or if I wake you up, or grab you—it's like me and blue monsters. It's like me and the woods."

"...I guess it is," Billy breathed into his neck.

Steve's feet were dead asleep, but Billy was addictively warm, and listening. "And that's—I get that, that makes sense, your brain's all—doesn't want you to fuckin'—die. But don't—don't try to—if you think I'm—I'm a *minefield*, lock your room or something, go for a drive—go to Ms. Williams, I guess, don't—don't try to fuck me into not exploding, don't—just *don't*."

"I just thought it'd—" Billy dropped his head to Steve's shoulder again, wrapping his hand tight around the back of his skull. "—it wasn't—if you have to have me here, at least—"

"Shit," Steve sighed, closing his eyes tight. "You never wanted me at all, did you. You just—I wouldn't calm down, I was freaking out, you

kissed me so I'd chill the hell out. *Damn it.*"

"Wait, what," Billy lifted his head again, running his thumbs across Steve's cheeks, and squinting at him in the dim light that filtered from the stove hood through the afghan. "No, I thought you'd be *more* likely to hit me, what the fuck. Wandering around in the snow with your shirt off, and the *fucking bat*, *jesus*. Thought I was gonna fucking—*cream my pants*, snow melting off the nails and dripping red down your shoulders—*good way to die*, I thought—"

Steve snorted, laughing. "What?!"

"—just like—melting in your hair—running down your—"

"Okay, okay, yeah," Steve squirmed, face flaming, and hoped Billy couldn't feel him getting hard in his sweatpants. "Meant when I almost dragged you down the stairs, and you thought I might bash your head on the ground, or—"

"...oh, uh."

"Yeah, that's—that's what I thought," Steve closed his eyes, swallowing, "—don't—don't pull that shit, it's not—"

"Shut the hell up, you did the same thing to me in the Mexican place," Billy bonked their heads together, "—you just wanted me to calm down, you even told me how nasty I fuckin' was, you said I tasted *rotten*."

"You were drinking *spiced rum*, eugh," Steve shuddered. "It's not even good in *coke*—"

"Yeah, right. So if you can kiss me to shut me up and tell me I'm disgusting, I can—"

"Shit, wait." Steve reached over his shoulder to smack some fingers over Billy's mouth again. He ignored the immediate licking. He tried to *keep* ignoring the licking, and focus. "No, it's—"

"And again *after* you said we were done," Billy laughed. "Right there against the counter. It's okay if you're just shutting me up, I get it, I like it a hell of a lot better than—"

"No," Steve shook his head, "—that's not—that's not why—"

"You kiss me to impress *Will*, or when I'm being a fucking *pussy*," Billy hissed in his ear, "—now I'm supposed to break bottles, and wave your kiddie bat around. You probably won't kiss me again unless I get into my *shit* somewhere and—and it's worth it to you to shut me down, because I'm—I'm a goddamn freak show, and I'm not *allowed* to ask for—for anything—"

"Shut it." Steve took a deep breath. "That's—shitty. Sorry. I—shit, I'm such an idiot."

"Nah, I get it. I'm *not easy*, whatever works. I'll stop asking. I can't get you to *like* me, you made that clear—I can't—" he took a shaky breath. "Nothing I do is gonna *matter* for that, even if I *get* to kiss you, you're not gonna have a—a fucking *movie moment*, you *said* it enough times—you let me at you *once* and *that* sure changed your mind—"

"Not what I meant!" Steve yelped, and Billy shushed him, laughing wetly into his shoulder. Steve held his breath, listening for Will, then braced himself, and whispered "Not—not what I *meant*." He blew air through his cheeks, trying to shove the words into place in his head. "You—*aren't* easy. You're crazy, you do all this crazy shit, living *alone* would be better than somebody who beat me up and tried to set my house on fire and—and acts like I'm a monster sometimes—scares kids," he took another shaky breath, holding Billy against him under the afghan when he tried to pull away. "Shut up, listen. If you were anyone else, I—I *would* help you. I'd—I'd still give you money. I'd fix your car, if you were someone else. Your dad shouldn't *hit* you, nobody's—that's not—I'd help any random asshole if their dad was such an...an *asshole*, christ. And then when you *left* I'd be *so fucking glad* you were gone. I'd throw a party. But—"

Billy leaned away, making the chair creak under them, and Steve grappled him close again. "You can stop *anytime*—" Billy growled.

"But you're *you*," Steve talked over him, and squeezed him, swallowing. "—you're—you're Billy Hargrove, and I...it's different, than—than if it was somebody else. I don't want you to leave. I—I never want you to *fucking* leave."

“Christ,” Billy whispered, clenching a fist in Steve’s hair.

“You—I mean. You could make me *happy* as hell with a blow job, yeah, if I—if I let you. But you can’t—fuck. Hargrove. I can’t *like you more*. I can’t like you more than I *do*, it doesn’t—I can’t—I like the *hell* out of you, I can’t—I like you *too fucking much*, you don’t—”

“Shut up,” Billy yanked him closer, laughing unevenly. His voice had gone hoarse. “Harrington. King Steve. You—”

The lights switched on, and Steve yanked the afghan off his head to stare into Will’s sleepy glower.

“Oh my *god*,” he moaned, switching the lights back off. “Are you guys *done* yet, shut *up*, it’s almost *morning*—”

“We can carve ‘Cockblock Byers’ on his tombstone,” Billy growled into Steve’s neck, sliding warm hands under his shirt. “Let’s go upstairs.” Steve froze at the feeling of Billy’s hot mouth on his neck, biting softly.

Will groaned, flailing his arms, and stomped off to the front room. “Just be *quiet!*”

“Come on, Harrington,” Billy shifted against Steve’s lap, whispering. “You been rock-hard since I sat down. You like me so goddamn much? Fill me up. We can lock the door. Just shove something in my mouth so I’m quiet.” He bit Steve’s earlobe, letting it slide from between his teeth, his hot breath hitting the wet places along Steve’s neck and sending a jolt to his dick. “*Anything*. Shove anything in me. Harrington. Come on. Gimme full-body carpet burn from your parent’s bedroom floor.”

“I CAN STILL HEAR YOU,” Will yelled from the other room, before what sounded like more yelling through a pile of pillows, and Steve startled out of his daze.

“Shit.” He swallowed, didn’t feel like it did the job, and swallowed again. “Shit, shit, shit—shit.” He swallowed a third time, and Billy slid off his lap and stood, pulling him upright.

“Come on, your majesty,” he whispered, as Steve tried to stand with

his feet completely asleep, and tried not to look at Billy's mouth.

Will's right there, he told himself firmly. *He pulled some pillows over his head, but he's fifteen feet away.*

"I could keep my clothes on, if you can't get it up for—" Billy laughed, shoulders tensing, and Steve got, horribly, even *harder*, imagining stripping him down in a pile of pillows, kissing him all over until he laughed and swore, and just—pointing out everything he liked to look at. With his mouth.

It's almost dawn, and I do not have a good track record with saying the right thing. He took a deep breath, held it, and felt Billy start to pull away. "Not with Will here," he whispered back, tucking his nose against Billy's jaw. "Not—just—" He could feel Billy swallow against his mouth.

Steve's feet were starting to wake up, the discomfort starting to dispel the images Billy'd conjured up. *Not that throwing him on the ground and shoving things in him sounds particularly great. Gags? Did he—* "Hey," he pulled back, wincing as he flexed a tingly foot, "—uh. Did you have—kind of—maybe a shitty boyfriend? In California?"

Billy's eyes were still on Steve's mouth. He licked his lips. "What?"

"Did you have a boyfriend in California that—"

"Ha," Billy blinked, pulling his hands from Steve's ribs to his forearms, "—what? I never had a *boyfriend*, the hell, Harrington."

They both winced, grinning, at the sound of Will's muffled wail into the pillows. "Shut *up*, you guys!"

"Had a few one-night stands," Billy leaned to whisper in his ear, and Steve tried not to grimace at the image of some stranger throwing him to the floor. "Shut up," Billy flinched back, hissing. "I know I'm a *fucking* slut, asswipe—"

"Wow, shhh, shush," Steve smacked his hand over Billy's mouth, ignoring his growl. "I don't—that's not—" he took a deep breath, "—I wasn't saying that. And I'm going to bed. You coming?"

Billy shook his hand off, whispering. “You know I’ll wash *off*, right,” he grinned, “—few good hot showers. Whatever fucking—fag cooties I’ve got, my—it won’t *stick* on you, you can fuck my mouth and not —”

“*Christ*.” Steve clapped both hands over Billy’s mouth, and Billy punched his shoulder, shoving him away. He stalked back out into the front room. When Steve inched back out there, Billy was curled up on the edge of the mattress, facing the wall of the fort—and he’d pulled the blankets over his head. With Will clutching at the other side of the blanket across the bed, Steve had the choice of crawling up between them from the foot of the mattress, or walking up and trying to shuffle down between the Williams’ heads. He lifted the blankets at the bottom, and army crawled up the middle of the bed. Will was making a weird little snorflle noise every time he breathed, his face squashed between the mattress and the pillow. Steve rolled to face Billy’s back. He reached out, then folded his hands under his arms, squeezing his eyes shut to think, before reaching out to pat the mattress by Billy’s shoulder, and using his fingers to write U...R...G-R-E-A-T down Billy’s back in big, slow capital letters the size of Billy’s whole back.

Billy snorted a laugh.

SORRY, Steve wrote. Then, after some thought, NOT SLUT. He ran the flat of his hand up and down Billy’s sweatshirt like his back was a chalkboard. NOT GROSS. He smoothed that away, Billy’s muscles tense against his fingers. WORRIED. SORRY.

Billy rolled back into him, squirming around to lie facing him in the faint rainbowy light filtered through the sheet over their heads. He reached over and wrote DIP SHIT across Steve’s chest, and Steve shivered, biting back a snicker.

DUMB ASS, Steve wrote, distracted by Billy’s unzipped sweatshirt, and his warm collarbones.

GOOD NIGHT KISS, Billy wrote back, fingers lingering on Steve’s side, and Steve took a shaky breath.

He smoothed his hand down Billy’s chest, swallowing, and feeling

warm skin.

MAGIC SLEEP KISS, Billy wrote, and Steve yanked his hand back to muffle a laugh. ABRA KA DABRA, Billy's fingers traced, slowly, before 'wiping away' the letters. SLEEP NO DREAM KISS.

Before he could think too hard, Steve scooted closer and pressed their lips together, then leaned back against his pillow as Billy grabbed at his hands and shirt.

NOT READY, Billy wrote.

Steve could feel him panting, and feel the blood pounding under his fingers against Billy's chest. He'd tasted like chocolate.

ASSHOLE, Billy wrote, firmly, letting his head thump forward against their clenched hands. LET ME.

Y—, Steve began spelling, and Billy tugged at his sleeves, and his fingers, clumsy in the dark, and curled closer. Their knees bumped, and Steve raised one, grinning in the dark as Billy slid a leg into the gap, and scrambled closer until he had his hands clenched in Steve's shirt, and his breath was warm against Steve's mouth. Steve started again, spelling YES against the warm soft skin of Billy's stomach. He let his fingers run over the muscles Billy liked to show off, running around shirtless, and felt him huff a laugh.

Billy took a deep breath, and splayed his palm out against Steve's chest, breathing shakily. KING, he finally wrote, and stopped again, and Steve stopped exploring the smooth skin and soft wispy curls between his bellybutton and his sweatpants.

WHAT, he spelled back.

LET ME, Billy wrote again, and Steve was already writing DO IT.

Billy leaned closer, his breath warm against Steve's lips. LET ME STAY.

Steve froze, his lips almost brushing Billy's.

LET ME STAY HERE, Billy tried, and Steve leaned in to kiss him,

unable to resist. YOU WILL STARVE. His mouth was as hot as ever, Steve thought, a small part of his mind on the letters spelling out against his chest, the rest imagining curling up every night against Billy Hargrove.

AM FINE, he wrote across Billy's stomach, feeling him twitch away.

LONELY, Billy wrote back, and Steve was still for a long second, before leaning in to kiss him again.

He kept it slow and quiet, memorizing the smell of soap and cologne and *Billy*, and feel of his mustache, and slid the arm he was lying on under Billy's head to hold him close. He smoothed his hand up Billy's abs a few times. I M OKAY.

NOT OKAY, Billy insisted, and Steve squeezed him, eyes burning.

He took a few long deep breaths before pulling back to run the back of his hand over Billy's pecs again. HAVE TO GO, he wrote, concentrating on keeping his letters huge and slow. DONT GET HURT.

Billy pressed him back into the pillows with more kisses—*I'll miss the moustache*, Steve thought, suppressing a giggle as his tears ran over the bridge of his nose and into the pillow. His lips were starting to feel tender under the onslaught, and he closed his eyes, relaxing

DUMB FUCK, Billy wrote under the collar of his t-shirt. STARVE CRAZY.

Steve pulled their foreheads together, feeling Billy's eyelashes brush his cheek. WANT YOU TO STAY. Billy nuzzled closer, squeezing his hand and kissing his knuckles. BUT DONT. BILLY SAFE.

Steve's fingers started to hurt in Billy's crushing grip, before he swallowed against Steve's shoulder, and sighed, nodding. He let go of Steve's hands to grab his shirt, and Steve pulled him close.

The next morning, Steve woke to the noise of the polaroid camera shutter, and Billy's shoulders shaking with laughter against his face.

He groaned. He was eventually lured awake with promises of pancakes and bacon, and after Will wolfed his down, Billy and Steve chewed their bacon and listened to more story. Will read about the whole band going up a mountain, which sounded awful, and into some underground set of tunnels, which sounded infinitely worse, particularly after Idiot Pippin decided to find every mysterious thing in the caves and huck a rock at it. He threw a rock at the water outside, and Billy flailed his arms along with the book's flailing tentacles until Steve leaned to bump shoulders. "Come on, you'd totally have thrown the rock," he whispered, and Billy snorted.

"I'd have cannonballed in," he whispered back, and Will lowered the book to glare at them as they both cracked up.

Steve tried to cover his snickering. "Who's Pippin, Will?

"Dustin is Pippin—"

"Yeah, that scans," Billy mumbled, as Steve laughed into his shoulder.

When Dustin-Pippin's rocks drew the monsters up through the tunnels, Steve sipped his hot chocolate, gazing into the middle distance. Billy slid an arm around him, kissing him under his ear where his neck met his jaw. *Billy makes hot chocolate like I do on...bad nights*, Steve thought, letting the peppermint swirl around his mouth.

Even when he's drinking it himself. He frowned at the memory of Billy up at 3am, under an afghan, drinking Steve's pointlessly-complicated ritualistic blend of flavors. *And just handing it to me, when I got up*, his mouth quirked. Then, out of the blue, the wizard fell to his *death*, and they both stared at Will.

"What the fuck?" asked Billy.

"Hopper, no," Steve whispered.

"So I went to pick up my car..." Billy leaned back against the counter, letting his head drop to Steve's shoulder.

Steve tried to keep washing dishes without jostling him off. “Yeah?”

“They said it was all paid up. That you had them do a tune-up. Change the oil.”

“Yep?”

“You *sure* you don’t want a blow job?”

“Jesus *shit*, you don’t—I’m—I’m not a *vending machine*,” Steve jerked away, trying to ignore Billy’s stagger. “*Stop. Just—christ.*”

“I dunno, I seem to keep pressing buttons.” Billy pushed himself up on the counter, sighing.

“You don’t have to fucking *put coins in* to get me to be nice, what the *hell*.”

“You don’t wanna take my currency anyway,” Billy laughed, swallowing hard. “Kinda hard finding anybody that wants what *Billy Hargrove*’s got. Maybe I should hit an exchange.”

“What?!” Steve smacked his handful of silverware into the suds with a splashing clatter. “What the *hell* are you even talking about.”

“I’ve got someplace to stay, my car’s working again, you keep—” he glowered, waving a hand unhelpfully at Steve washing dishes, “—you’re doing all your—bullshit, because you—you *like* me, okay, shit. You think I’m hot, sometimes. You’d help *anybody*. ‘Cause nothing I’ve got is worth *shit* to Steve Fucking Harrington.” Billy kicked his feet. “—and I know it’s not worth much to *anyone*, but like—can’t we just make an—exchange rate. Just—”

Steve shook the water off his hands and stepped over, pushing a soapy hand against Billy’s mouth. “I don’t like where this is going. Don’t—this isn’t—” he took a deep breath, and Billy watched, eyes half-lidded. “You aren’t—you don’t *owe* me, okay. You don’t have to—pay me back, or—or *earn* anything—*Hargrove*.” Billy’s wandering attention snapped back to his face. “Look. If you wanna pay me back for the *money*, get—get a goddamn job. When you get some *extra*, send me a fucking check. But don’t just—don’t—*do not ever* tell me you want my cock in your mouth unless that’s *all you want*, okay,

just—if that’s—if you just want *me*, then we can—”

“Hey, guys, I’m gonna take a shower, are you—never mind, I’m taking a bath,” Will turned on his heel in the stairwell and went back upstairs, and Billy dissolved into snickers.

“Use my room!” he shouted up. “Sparkly soaps!”

“SCREW YOU,” Will called back, laughing. “REALLY REALLY LONG BATH.” He tromped onto the landing.

Billy turned, grinning, back to Steve, who stepped back. “I’m *serious* —”

“Oh, you’re *serious*,” Billy whined, laughing, and rubbing the soap off his face with his sleeve.

“Shut the hell up, stop saying you’ll give me a blow job like—like it’s *ditch-digging*.” Steve hunched his shoulders, stalking back to wash dishes, then waving his hands instead of grabbing any dishes. “—‘Here, you—dickbag—monster, calm down, I’m *Billy Hargrove*, I’ll put my *mouth* on your dick so you don’t *hit* me. You’re so fucking broken, Broken Steve Harrington, up nights seeing monsters and talking to nobody, I’ll suck you off ‘cause you can’t get a *fucking date*.’ Fuck you. Just—*fuck* you. Jesus.”

“What...” Billy stared at him.

Steve didn’t look up to meet the stare, though he could feel it intensifying into a glower. He ducked his head, and kept scrubbing the melted cheese off a plate. The pipes hissed as Will cranked the water on upstairs.

“Harrington.” Billy slid off the counter. “Hey.”

Steve shrugged, tired of trying to explain himself, but allowed himself to be pulled backwards against Billy’s chest. He tried not to think too hard about the biceps and strong hands against his torso. “What.”

“Tell me what you want. You want me to want you?”

“Ye-*no*. I don’t—stop trying to *handle* me, christ. I’m not a zoo ani

—”

Billy spun him around, pushing him against the counter. “Harrington. Do you—” he narrowed his big bluey-green eyes, and Steve felt a flutter of idiocy in his chest, pulling him towards kissing Billy’s freckles, and across his eyelashes.

He dropped his gaze, trying not to stare back into Billy’s eyes, and ended up watching him lick his lips. Steve squeezed his eyes shut with a groan.

“Harrington,” Billy said again, both hands holding Steve’s head pointed in his direction, and Steve felt his cheeks heating.

“I’m listening, what.”

“You think I’m hot.” It was a statement, but Billy sounded more open to opposing views than usual.

“I’m not *blind*,” Steve muttered, then realized Billy’s hands could feel his face heating like a stove burner, and grabbed Billy’s wrists with soapy fingers. “I can tell—I know you think I’m—”

“You want me to kiss you for no reason,” Billy whispered, so close Steve could taste the smoke on his breath. “Just ‘cause I want to.”

“Fuck.” Steve had meant to pull Billy’s hands away from his face, but he just stood there, eyes closed, his hands loose on Billy’s muscled forearms. His face was probably *glowing* red. “If you—if you fucking —”

Billy yanked him forward into a kiss, and Steve blinked, staring at Billy’s long lashes so close to his face they were blurry. “You shut up this time,” Billy whispered, and Steve let his eyes drift shut again, turning his head for a better angle, and relaxing into the heat of Billy’s mouth and hands against his face. Steve winced as the counter dug into his back, but slid his arms around Billy’s neck, pulling him close enough to feel Billy’s heart thudding in his chest—nearly as much as Steve’s was.

“So you’re saying I don’t have to *bargain*.” Billy panted, mouthing along his jawline. His eyelashes tickled. “You’ll *let* me. I can just

—” He slid his hand up the back of Steve’s neck and pulled him into another press of lips, and Steve heard himself moan into it, and licked deeper into Billy’s mouth, pretending he wasn’t completely obvious.

“I can just kiss you?” Billy laughed, pulling back enough to stare into his face, and Steve kissed him again. He tasted like beer, a bit, and lunch, but mostly *good*.

“Like I was ever gonna say no.”

“You did,” Billy panted into his neck. His fingers shook, combing through Steve’s hair and catching clumsily at his ears. “You said no. You said we were done, you said I was rotten—” He pressed his whole body against Steve’s, and Steve was vaguely aware he’d have a bruise across his back the next day from the edge of the counter, but mostly he was focused on the friction and pressure where the hard line of Billy’s cock in his jeans rubbed against Steve’s own.

“Sorry,” he breathed back. “Sorry. Everybody’s gross, I mean, sometimes—”

“Shut up, shut up—” Billy ran his hands down Steve’s sides, covering his mouth with his own again, and Steve forgot his argument. Billy’s hips nudged forward again, and Steve swallowed a moan, pulling an arm free so he could grab the back of Billy’s jeans and hold him close. Billy laughed, and leaned closer, his eyes drifting closed on a soft groan.

Steve pulled his hand around, tucking his fingers in the front of Billy’s jeans, and Billy jerked his head back, wide-eyed.

“Will hasn’t even turned the bath water off yet, there’s time,” Steve slid his thumb under the button, pulling back to let Billy’s lower lip slip from between his teeth. Billy’s eyes fluttered shut. “Can I stick my hand down your pants?”

Billy jerked against him, then hugged Steve’s head, laughing against the side of his face. “Speak more of this poetry to me.”

“Shut up,” Steve laughed, kissing the bit of Billy’s jaw he could

reach. "Can I?"

Billy was quiet, and after a few seconds, Steve pushed his hands away so he could pull back and see him face to face. He'd gone kinda expressionless, and Steve reached up to flick his earring.

"You gonna let me?"

"You decided I was nasty pretty fast the last time," Billy shrugged, smiling down at Steve's hand, "—maybe—"

"Don't drink any *Captain Morgan*," Steve flipped the button open with his thumb, raising his eyebrows, "—and don't *threaten any kids*, and I'll think—I won't think you're nasty." He tugged the zipper pull, staring back into Billy's eyes. "Lemme unzip you."

"You—you fucking tell me if you change your mind." Billy clenched his hands in Steve's shirt, shoving him back against the counter. "*New rule*, Harrington. Don't—just *tell* me, I'll back off. I'll—I'll stay six feet away. Whatever you want."

"Christ. Yeah." Steve nodded. "Not gonna change my mind, okay."

"Fucking say it," Billy growled, shoving him back again. "You get my cock in your hand and wanna puke, don't—" he swallowed, leaning in to grate Steve's back against the edge of the counter, "—don't—just tell me to get out. Throw my ass in the garage again, whatever —"

"That's not—I'm not going to—" Steve stared back into Billy's increasingly thunderous smirking face, and tried to think. "—okay, yeah, yeah, I promise. Okay. If I get—pissed about something, your —your dick, or whatever—"

Billy snorted, leaning in again for a kiss. "Yeah. Don't hit me if you get pissed about my dick."

"Mmf. Okay," Steve couldn't think and kiss Billy at the same time, and kissing felt incredibly good, "—wait, sto—wait. I won't—I'm not gonna hit you *anyway*, Hargrove, *jesus*."

"I don't know what the hell decides you about people," Billy

shrugged, sliding his arms over Steve's shoulders and around his neck.

Steve squeezed him tightly, breathing in the warmth and smells of Billy Hargrove. "I'm already decided about you, Hargrove."

Billy laughed, swallowing, and Steve leaned in to kiss him again, holding him close with one hand on his lower back. At Billy's nod, he pulled the zipper down with the other.

He slid his hand in to smooth skin over hot hard flesh, and the tickle of hair, and paused, feeling only Billy's dick and the interior of his jeans.

"—I need to do some laundry," Billy laughed against his mouth, "—shit, sorry."

"I could've caught you in the *zipper*," Steve froze, staring down at Billy's lack of underwear, "—you shoulda *said something*—"

Billy grabbed Steve's hand out of his pants, and yanked his sweatshirt down over his dick with his other hand, hunching his shoulders. He ducked his head, grinning. "Yeah, I didn't think this'd get too far. I'm gonna—"

"God dammit," Steve grabbed him by the front of his shirt and yanked him back into a kiss, sliding his other hand back in to grab Billy's cock, and slide his thumb over the tip of it.

Billy yelped against his mouth, half-falling against him, and jarring him into the counter again.

"C'mere—" Steve reached his less-busy hand around to grab the back of Billy's jeans, and kept his thumb rubbing over the tip of Billy's cock, and the vein underneath—Billy was certainly *wet* enough—but his eyes were as wet as his dick was, and the quick breaths he was taking against Steve's mouth felt less like excitement, and more like hyperventilation. *Okay*, Steve thought, taking a deep breath, *I gotta get this right, or he will absolutely bite my dick off*. "D'you want me to stop," he squeezed gently, but didn't move. "I—I'll keep going, I mean, *I want to keep going*, but if you want me to stop we can—"

“Don’t you fucking dare stop,” Billy’s voice cracked.

“I’m gonna jack you off,” Steve whispered, between kisses, and Billy whined, licking into his mouth, “—mnn. And then we’re gonna need a shower, ‘cause we’ll *both* be gross.” Letting go of Billy’s pants, since he wasn’t trying to pull away, Steve slid his hand up Billy’s back and around the back of his neck. “*Then* we can—we can hang out with Will, and I’m—I’m not—letting go of you.”

Billy laughed against his cheek, swallowing. “Fuck yeah.” He nodded.

“Okay, stop—stop freaking out.” Steve put his attention back on Billy’s dick, and trying to ignore his own. The trail of hair up Billy’s *suspiciously tanned* abs brushing his knuckles didn’t help, and neither did Billy’s clumsy kisses and swallowed noises, or him apparently not knowing where to put his hands. “Shit,” Steve clenched his hand in Billy’s hair to keep him from running off, and pulled his hand back to unzip his own pants, “—I just have to—”

“Want me to do something about that,” Billy whispered, biting at his lips. “Let me get down—”

“S’fine, it’s your turn.”

“...finish me off, then. You can use my mouth in the shower.”

“Christ,” Steve unzipped himself and grabbed Billy’s cock again. He yanked faster, holding Billy close, so his hand could just barely move between them.

Billy staggered against him, grabbing at his shirt, and Steve pushed him back, grinning into his kisses.

“Sit down. Babe. Sit down in a chair—”

Billy clung, laughing. “Shit, you make my knees—” He backed until his legs hit the chair and dropped into it, hanging on to Steve’s arms, and Steve straddled his lap. Steve’s hand was just starting to get tired at the awkward angle when Billy’s nails clenched into his arm. “My knees just—Ha-Harrington—fuck—” he panted, and Steve leaned to bite at his ear.

"Come on, *Billy Hargrove*," he whispered, and Billy made a broken noise, jerking against him. Steve barely had time to close his hand on the warmth of Billy's dick to keep their shirts from telling poor Will somebody'd been jacked off in the kitchen. Billy collapsed against his shoulder, his face hot against Steve's neck. "...sh...shit. Should probably get your hand washed off," he said hoarsely. "Want me to lick it clean?"

"Nah." Steve nuzzled in to kiss his ear, then his cheek, then his mouth, as Billy lifted his head.

He panted into the kiss, then pulled back to watch Steve's face, eyes narrowed. "You—uh," he grinned down at himself, a little lopsidedly, "—everything still okay?"

"Kinda desperate—after watching that, shit," Steve whispered back, pushing in to kiss him again, and Billy laughed against his mouth.

"Christ, what is even happening. Fuck yeah. Come on. Don't change your mind." He grabbed Steve's clean hand, dragging him toward the stairs.

Once they got in Steve's bathroom, Steve wondered, briefly, how much hot water Will had left—before his brain entirely devolved into appreciating Billy's ass sticking out of the shower as he turned on the water, and his wriggle out of his pants.

Steve shrugged out of his own sweatshirt, tried to kick out of his pants and skivvies, and staggered over the pile—his underwear still looped over his ankle, the pocket of his jeans caught on his foot—to slide his fingers up and under Billy's t-shirt, pushing it up with both hands flat against Billy's chest. Steve followed along with his mouth and tongue, and Billy grinned, raising his arms to let Steve pull his shirt off over his head. He leaned into Steve's hands and his kisses, laughing as he allowed himself to be pushed backward into the shower. "You're still...wearing a shirt," he said against Steve's mouth, and Steve rocked their hips together.

"Really—" Steve kissed him under the showerhead, "—super don't care." He combed wet curls out of Billy's face with his fingers.

Billy grinned, lowering his eyes to look through the water clinging to his lashes. “You’ll have to let go for me to blow you,” he whispered, mouthing along Steve’s jaw, and Steve nuzzled into his neck. Billy licked the water up the side of Steve’s face, and Steve held him tighter, cackling, and smushed him up against the wall of the shower in a licking war until they were both laughing too hard to kiss. Steve slurped the water out of Billy’s mustache, and Billy smacked at his head, laughing so hard he wheezed, then pushed away, placing his hands on Steve’s shoulders.

“Ha-Harrington,” he laughed, trying to hold a straight face. He pushed his hair out of his face.

“Hargrove,” Steve whispered back, giggling as the shower water got in his mouth. He tried to lean back in for a kiss, one hand on his cock, sliding up and down in the water, the other reaching for Billy.

Billy grabbed both of his hands. “*Harrington*, you *idiot*, leggo your dick,” he leaned his face out of the spray, coughing, “—you gotta let me kneel, you *moron*, if—”

“Oh!” Steve stopped trying to pull him back, laughing. “Right. Right—sorry—” He leaned in for another extremely wet kiss, getting an ear full of water from the showerhead, and Billy pushed him firmly away, dropping to his knees. Steve shivered, leaning against the wall as warm hands slid up the back of his thighs to squeeze his ass, and Billy licked a swath up his dick.

The wet heat of Billy’s mouth and the muscles in his throat felt even better than the first time, if possible, and Steve remembered to curl his fingers into Billy’s wet curls. *Almost there, already*, he thought, grinning down just as Billy pulled off, coughing and wiping his face.

“Wait, no,” Steve dropped to a crouch, sliding a hand along Billy’s jaw to pull his face up, while he tried to wipe at his snot, and red eyes. “Jesus, you’re drowning, stop. Are—are you *okay*?”

“Don’t *flatter* yourself, your finest majesty. Shit. S’fine, I’ve got my breath now.” Billy suppressed a cough, then couldn’t. He leaned his face back into the spray, shaking his head so his hair flung out. “—it’s fine, come on. I’m not your granny’s *fine china*. Come on, what

the *fuck*, Harrington, you're not gonna kill me with your goddamn *fun-sized pencil* dick. *Harrington.* " His snarling sounded hoarse.

Steve jerked his hand back, and stepped away to avoid Billy blowing his nostrils clear over the drain. "Shit."

"You aren't fucking—*King sized*, okay—" Billy laughed, kicking out, and Steve turned as far away as he could *get* in the shower stall, grabbing the soap to slick himself up.

I keep forgetting what he's like, Steve thought, yanking away at his cock, at this point trying for some kind of I-don't-care-what-you-think revenge orgasm. *It's normal, I think? It's a good size? It fits right in my hand? Fucking...fucking Billy Goddamn Hargrove.*

"The hell are you *doing*," Billy yelled, and Steve flinched as wet terrycloth splatted loudly against his back, then slid down.

He sighed, trying to focus on heat, and friction—

"Screw you, fucking—bastard—asshole—" Billy coughed, staggered to his feet, and shoved Steve around, leaning his forearm across Steve's chest to shove him into the wall. "Don't. Harrington. Christ. Stop it." He swallowed, wiping his face again. "Don't pull this shit. Come on. You have to tell me, it's—it's a goddamn *rule*, you have to say."

"Say *what*," Steve turned to stare at him, and Billy's eyes narrowed.

"...you—you fucking changed your mind. Tell me to get the hell out. Don't pretend I'm *fucking invisible*, your majesty, come on."

"I didn't *change my mind*, you started *screaming at me*," Steve hissed back, and Billy grinned, leaning into him, and kissing his neck.

"Nah, you pulled back—"

Steve yanked his hand free, trying not to enjoy the hot breath against his collarbones, or the friction against Billy's stomach. "Lemme fucking get *off*, what the hell is wrong with you."

Billy nodded against his shoulder, and slid his hand between them,

but Steve grabbed him by the shoulders, holding him at arm's length.

"You—you promise not to—don't *bite* me or—or *anything*—"

Billy wagged his tongue, grinning, and Steve groaned, pulling them both down to sit wedged against each other in the little shower stall. "It'll be worse down here." Billy raised his eyebrows, tucking his hair behind his ear. "I could suck you if you lean against the back wall—"

"No, no, don't drown again—" Steve tried to think with Logic, and not just...climb into Billy's lap and rub off on him like Clifford the Big Friendly Pervert. He cleared his throat. "Use your hand."

Billy squinted at him.

"I mean, what if you. Use your hand. So I can kiss you." *I am a genius*, he realized, feeling like he could feel his pulse from his dick clear up to his brain. *I can't kiss him with his face on my dick.* "Please."

"Wha—?!" Billy's legs fell apart as Steve pushed him back against the wall of the shower, sliding his hands over tanned freckled skin. Billy's wet curls drug at his fingers.

Steve grabbed one of Billy's hands and licked a finger into his mouth to suck on. "You—you can breathe if I'm kissing you."

"Yeah, I guess—" Billy pulled him in to a kiss, sliding his knuckles down Steve's chest and stomach, catching against his wet shirt, to wrap his fingers around Steve's cock. Steve groaned into the kiss, scooting closer.

Once they'd finished, and Steve had relaxed a while, panting against Billy's neck, he pulled a hand free to punch the nearest part of Billy—his knee. Billy snorted, nuzzling his hair, and Steve growled. "...the fuck, Hargrove. You have words too, y'know, you could *ask* whether I'm—doing whatever that—whatever you thought I was doing, christ. Instead of *insulting my dick*, what the *hell*, dude, what the *fuck* was that even—"

"Sorry," Billy laughed against him. "Thought if I made you mad, you'd come back over."

"...babe," Steve sighed.

"You ignore me, I will get your fucking attention," Billy whispered against his head. "I'm *right here*, Harrington, don't you fucking *dare* look through me, I will—I will..." He took a deep, shaky breath, and Steve pulled him into an open-mouthed kiss.

"Nobody's ignoring you. I'm listening to your asshole voice right now, okay, you said my dick was *fun-sized* and I'm still—"

"Shit, I did," Billy snickered, and Steve rolled his eyes. "I said you weren't *king sized*—"

"Yeah, okay, California Queen—"

Billy cracked up, curling into him, and Steve stroked his hair, staring down at the side of his head.

"...you gonna apologize to my dick, you bastard?"

"I could kiss it better," Billy offered, lifting his head. "You could pound me into the mattress—"

"Christ," Steve ran his thumb along Billy's jaw, feeling him lean into it. "I wasn't ignoring you—I mean, I guess I was, kinda, just 'cause you were screaming—like—*bullshit* at me. I thought you were gonna start throwing *bottles*." Billy hummed, and Steve sighed. "You wanna shampoo?"

"—what? Fuck yeah, yes—" Billy shoved him off, scrambling for a shampoo bottle, and then dropped back beside him, looking annoyingly smug.

"The hell are you so proud for," Steve muttered, sudsing his hands up, and Billy grinned, ducking under his hands for a kiss. They spent so long kissing that the shower started washing the shampoo back off Steve's outstretched hands, and he snorted against Billy's mustache, bringing his hands up to start soaping sodden curls.

Billy let himself tip forward against Steve's shoulder, laughing against his collarbone.

"What," Steve grunted, still annoyed, and ran his left thumb up and down the nape of Billy's neck while he carefully avoided yanking Billy's earring, rubbing shampoo in with his other hand.

"We're on again, huh." He could feel Billy's grin against his shoulder. "We're screwing around. It's not bullshit for Will anymore. Right?" He pulled back to look Steve in the face, smile intent.

Steve stared back, waving his hand in the water so he could wipe away the suds trailing down Billy's forehead towards his eye. In the bright overhead light, Billy's eyes looked less like a summer swimming pool, and more like rainclouds.

"Come on, Harrington. You don't hate me anymore. I made it up to you, right?"

Steve licked his lips, blinking back from noticing the tips of Billy's eyelashes were almost blond, when he didn't wear mascara. "What?"

"Shit. Never mind." Billy started to turn to face the other way, and Steve grabbed his head with the hand that was still soapy, and tried to open the shampoo with the other.

"Wait, what? No. I never *hated* you, what the hell."

"Ha. Whatever."

Steve slapped a handful of shampoo into Billy's curls, scowling. "—are you—are you *deaf*? I keep saying all this—just—dumb—" He scrubbed Billy's head so hard it pushed him sideways, then yanked him close. "I said I *like* you, you *fucking dickhead*. You're important, remember?"

"Yeah, I know, humans are important," Billy tried to dodge Steve's thorough fingers, snickering, "—I get it, I know, calm down, *jesus*—"

Steve grabbed his face with both hands, squishing his cheeks together, and Billy was laughing too hard to get away. "No, that's—"

that's, like, yeah, I mean, but you're—Hargrove.” He stopped giving Billy chipmunk cheeks to wipe more suds before they got in his eyes.

“You never make any sense,” Billy grinned, leaning into his hand, “—I never know what you're—”

Steve pulled him into a hard kiss, then pulled back, biting his lips together while he thought. “I—I would eat brussels sprouts for you.”

“Oh my *fucking god*,” Billy collapsed sideways against him, cackling, “—what the *hell*—”

His hair swiped the whole side of Steve's soaked shirt with suds, and he peeled it off, startling as Billy's hair brushed his chest. “Come here, sit up.”

“I can't, *jesus christ*,” Billy slid his arms around Steve's waist, laughing. “What the fuck, your majesty. Holy shit. You—” he lifted his head to wipe his face, “—you won't get scurvy, then, you'll eat some fucking fiber after I'm gone?”

“...yeeeah?” Steve's eyes narrowed. “That wasn't—”

“You're so weird,” Billy grinned at him, cheeks flushed, and Steve had to lean in and kiss him. “You're fucked in the head,” he laughed against Steve's mouth, sighing. “But we're good now, right—”

“We were good before,” Steve groaned. “Come on, turn around, I have to finish before the water gets cold.”

“I'd eat a teabag for you,” Billy laughed, letting himself be manhandled into facing the showerhead, and Steve forgot about the shampoo, and started kissing along his spine. Billy laughed harder, leaning his head in his hands, and Steve got up on his knees to lean over him, stroking the suds out of his hair in the lukewarm water. Billy spat, wiping soap out of his face. “Why are we eating things we hate for each other?”

“I dunno.” Steve felt his face heating. And his neck. *When the water gets cold, it'll feel good*, he thought, smirking at himself resignedly, *unless it turns straight to steam when it hits my skin*. “But yeah.” He cleared his throat. “We're—good. You're good, I'm not—mad, or

anything. *I like you*, he thought,—*and I wish you could hear what I'm thinking, and put it together yourself. It'd be easier. Except you'd die laughing.*

Billy leaned back, smirking up, and Steve finished rinsing with the hand that wasn't holding Billy's head off the floor of the shower. Occasionally, he had to switch. By the time his knees started to hurt against the tile, he was getting the last of the suds out of thick curls, careful of the side where Billy's head had met the door. By the time he finished, Billy's eyes had slid closed, and his smirk relaxed into a soft grin. Steve leaned in and touched his tongue to the tip of Billy's nose, and Billy's foot jerked and thonked into the door of the shower stall. He glared up, upside down, watching Steve fall sideways into the corner laughing, then scrambled around to kneel facing him, and grab the conditioner.

"Water's getting cold." Steve grinned up at him, wiping it out of his face, and Billy looked him up and down, licking his lips.

"What do I get if I turn it off," he whispered, and Steve snorted, blinking, "—you look pretty cold...Harrington."

Steve pressed himself back against the wall, laughing, and trying to get his legs out of the rapidly-cooling water. "What d'you want me to say?"

"Ask me to warm you up," Billy grinned over, reaching back to slide a finger along the handle, "—maybe you can convince me." The water went *fully* cold, splashing on Steve's feet, and Billy flattened himself against the wall to avoid it, shivering. He kept his eyes on Steve's, though, keeping one hand stroking the handle to turn off the faucet, and sliding the other up his abs, slowly, brushing his fingers through the water along his muscles. "Don't keep me *waiting*, Harrington," he whispered, grinning. "You got what it takes? Get me to just...reach up...and turn off the cold water? WHat you gonna say to me," he asked, dropping his voice to a throaty whisper, "*King Steve Harrington?*"

Steve's mouth went dry watching. "*What,*" he nearly *barked* a laugh, as Billy twined his fingers in his necklace, and pretend to pull himself forward, biting his lower lip. "Christ, Hargrove." They'd both

pressed their knees together, swinging their legs away from the freezing water, and he caught Billy's glance trying to see whether his words were having any effect on Steve's dick. *Hell yeah, they are*, he tried not to just lose it snickering, —*this is so dumb, christ, he's so hot. We're so dumb*. Steve's feet were against the stall door, and it would have taken just the slightest pressure to push it open, and escape. He pulled them back, trying to think of what to say. "Please turn it off," he couldn't help laughing, "—come over and warm me up."

Billy cranked it off, halfway in his lap before Steve had really gotten to appreciate his sudden grin. "I wanna choke on your dick," he whispered, licking the water up Steve's jaw. "I like it. Come on."

Between Billy's shivering, warm bulk suddenly in his lap, the tongue gliding along his jaw, and the hot breath in his ear, Steve's engine had flooded, and he gave himself a second to restart. "...r-really?"

"I really want to," Billy whispered back, and Steve's heart must have started in, like, four-wheel drive, he realized, because he felt like he was radiating heat.

"Shit," he pulled Billy's head around for an actual kiss. "I think my dick just caught on fire, probably. Like a lightsaber."

Billy went still, and then Steve realized his shoulders were shaking with laughter. "...that's disgusting," he wheezed, sliding his hand down Steve's thigh, to run his thumb up the anatomy in question. Steve jerked against him, gasping. "Still 100% flesh penis," Billy reported, and Steve snorted, cheeks flaming.

"Shut up, you're—it's not *my* fault I'm hard enough to drill metal—"

Billy did the thing Steve was starting to recognize as being taken by surprise, but in a good way—he smiled, leaning his face against Steve's knees, and took a couple of deep breaths.

"What about you?" Steve lifted a hand—his heart was pounding so hard he was *shaking*, he realized, unless it was cold. He didn't feel cold. He stroked Billy's hair, squeezing the water out. "So it's fair."

"Just spread your damn legs and hand me the conditioner," Billy

pressed his face harder against Steve's leg, and Steve grabbed the bottle and tucked it into his hand.

He's shaking too, Steve noticed, watching him squirt half the bottle into his hand, mutter under his breath, and squish it through his fingers onto his own dick.

"I'm so glad you don't call it, like, a cockmeister," Steve blurted, and Billy stopped moving entirely to stare. "Tommy got all weird in the communal showers at first, he kept saying shit like 'Little Tommy the Cockmeister wants to meet Stevey Jr. for after dinner drinks—'"

"Sure he did." Billy's eyes narrowed, and he shot a glare over his shoulder at the doorway. "Lil' Tommy better stay in his fucking pants."

"What am I supposed to be doing," Steve turned so his back was against the tiled wall, letting his legs fall wherever, "—while you've got your hand on *your* cock and your mouth..." he trailed off, watching Billy waggle his tongue. "Jesus. While you're *choking* on me? I feel like I'm a shitty—"

"Like you'll be able to think that far," Billy leaned in for a kiss, grinning, "—you'll just be seeing *God*, okay—"

Steve licked his lips, laughing at the slight tickle of Billy's mustache as he kissed his way down Steve's chest, and tried to think. *It's the perfect opportunity*, he narrowed his eyes, staring vaguely through the door to the shower stall, *—he likes it when I'm nice to him, but he can't freak out and yell at me with his mouth full.*

The moment Billy's lips slipped over the head of his dick, all Steve could think about was sensation—the heat of his breath, and the texture of Billy's tongue, and the roughness of the roof of his mouth. "Uhnf," Steve grunted, letting his head fall back and closing his eyes. "Christ," he mumbled, and Billy pulled off to laugh.

"You there already?"

"Nah," Steve muttered as Billy wiped his mouth, and bent down again to kiss along Steve's inner thigh. "I was just, y'know. Oh my

god,” he groaned. “I thought I’d say all the shit you don’t let me, y’know. Y-you’re too good at this, I can’t. I can’t think.”

Billy hummed inquiringly, and the vibration pinpointed Steve’s entire awareness on the skin Billy was sucking.

Steve patted a clumsy hand at Billy’s head, wondering how much time was going by. “Will’s probably downstairs with a pillow over his head,” he realized, and Billy pulled back again, sitting crosslegged and coughing.

“Sorry, am I *boring* you?” He smiled around clenched teeth, wiping his mouth. “The fuck is all this shit you wanna say to me when I can’t answer back?”

“No, no, *damn* it,” Steve scrubbed his face with both hands, “—no, not—not like *that*, damn it. No.” *You’re so much work*, he wanted to say, and didn’t. “Come back, come here.” He squinted at Billy, trying to think of something perfect to say, then clapped. “Oh no, don’t turn the cold water back on!”

Billy snorted, then coughed, snickering. “I *should*, you fuck.”

“No, come on, let’s like—conserve body heat,” Steve tried to keep a straight face, but his shoulders were shaking with laughter. “Out here, uh, where it’s really cold, I really *need* you.” He raised his eyebrows, pointing at his dick, and Billy laughed, leaning to gnaw at Steve’s knee.

He growled, too. “Asshole. Yeah, beg the snow monster of Hoth to blow you, and *maybe* he’ll have mercy—”

“Gross, no, I don’t want a—a *bigfoot thing*, wait.” Steve frowned, waving him closer. “Hoth.”

Billy scooted closer again. “Yeah. Star Wars?”

“Holy shit,” Steve breathed, “—you *nerd*, you watched the new one.”

“You *own* it!”

“Yeah, because *gremlins* use my *credit card*,” Steve rolled his eyes, as

if he didn't hand it over every time Dustin saw an ad for videotapes on TV, "—I don't pick that shit out." Billy huffed, shivering, and crawled back between Steve's sprawled legs. Steve tried to keep his train of thought through breathy, open-mouthed kisses down his abs. "I don't—jesus. That's the—you think—you think I *hate* you, and—fuck god your mouth."

Billy snorted, one hand tight on Steve's thigh, his other arm flexing as it moved between his legs, and the muscles of his throat squeezing Steve's dick.

"Mmm," Steve tried to talk, swallowing. "Nerd," he whispered, and Billy smacked his thigh, grunting. "No! Not—you're—I don't like it. Elves. Elf—bullshit, I don't—I like *you*—oh god I *love* you doing *that*—" Billy spluttered, shoulders shaking with laughter, but didn't pull off again, and Steve relaxed the fingers he'd automatically clenched in Billy's hair. "Shit. Shit, sorry, fuck. Sitting through—two goddamn days—elves and gremlins and—wedding parties—jesus, Hargrove," he whined in the back of his throat, back arching. "Billy—Billy Hargrove. Holy—holy crap. Shit." Keeping track of his thoughts with Billy Hargrove doing his best to be distracting was never going to work, and all he managed was to garble that he was coming at the exact moment he did so, so Billy didn't have time if there was anything he wanted to do about it. "Sorry," Steve whispered.

"Should be," Billy turned the shower handle just enough for a trickle to clean off his hand. His voice was hoarse, but he was somehow managing to swagger walking on his knees. "Who's the nerd now?"

"You." Steve watched him, registering for the first time that for *that* even a tan, there had to be a tanning bed somewhere that had had Billy Hargrove's naked dick rubbed all over the inside. "*You're* having a great time. You think I'd listen to a whole weekend of witches and goblins if you didn't like it?" He clambered up to push the door open, wishing he could use the Force to grab a bath towel. "I'd just tell Will to read 'em on his own. Or drop him at the arcade." He tied one around his waist.

"...I'm not into that stuff, I never even saw the movie until I came over here—"

“Yeah,” Steve leaned back into the stall with another towel, tossing it around Billy’s shoulders, and using it to pull him close. “Yeah, but you’re into it. If I get bored I can watch you—”

“What.” Billy glared back, chewing his lip, and Steve leaned in to kiss it.

“I like watching *you*. Y’know, into it. You really wanna know what the dwarves are gonna do, or whatever,” Steve kissed him again, pulling the towel up so he could start toweling Billy’s hair, pulling him close, so he could whisper “—it’s cute,” across Billy’s ear, and feel him twitch.

“...watch it, I’ll seduce you with my book-listening,” Billy whispered back, and Steve gave up on towelling and just hugged him.

“You already did, asshole, pay attention.”

When then finally made it downstairs, Will groaned at them. “You were up there *forever*.”

“Harrington can’t keep his hands off me,” Billy shrugged, dropping next to him, and Steve flopped with his head in Billy’s lap. “He likes watching me when I’m *into it*.”

Steve rolled onto his side, snickering, and then cleared his throat. “Okay, tell us about the fairies.” He waved a hand, and Billy snorted.

Will threw a pillow at Steve’s head. “They are *elves*—”

“Like at *Christmas*, Harrington,” Billy put in, and Will grabbed the whole comforter and threw it over them, half yelling, half laughing.

“I thought we already talked to the elves!” Steve whispered, and felt Billy cackling against him.

“That was Santa. This is where they make the toys now. Boromir is

a *good* knight and doesn't want to go in the workshops and know what Santa's bringing. Steveagorn is hot for the elves," Billy whispered, and Steve shoved him, wheezing with laughter.

"You shithead, that was actually helpful," Steve muttered, then buried his face against Billy's chest, whispering. "You sure you're a *good* knight, Hargrove?"

"Nancy used to game with us," Will stuck his head under the blanket to grin at them. "She dressed as an elf."

Billy rolled onto his face, groaning, and Steve flopped directly on top of him, facedown, so he could whisper in Billy's ear, and their legs all flailed together. Whenever it got boring—which was mostly—he let his head drop against the back of Billy's. He woke to the warm muscles under him going rigid, blinking to consciousness to Billy's knight character chasing one of the hobbits around a rock, trying to scare him and steal his stuff.

"Hey," Steve whispered, but Billy was listening intently to Will describing Froggo running away in fear—invisibly, again, and Steve secretly pictured him driving Wonder Woman's invisible jet. Steveagorn from the book told Billymir off, and sent him off to protect Book-Dustin and whoever the other one was, and Steve squeezed Billy's shoulders. "He's gonna protect the others, it's fine, he's a knight. He's gonna save the other kids."

"Actually he *dies*," Will said, with relish, and Billy rolled Steve off him and stood.

"Y'know what, I'm gonna take a run."

"We're almost done!" Will waved the book at him, and Billy stalked by him towards the door.

"I'll be back soon."

Shit, Steve thought, watching Will frown after Billy, then frown down at the book.

When Billy wandered back in, he started throwing things in a pan, and Steve let Will help while he set the table. It didn't take long.

Once seated, Will poked at the meat that had fallen out of his taco, and sighed.

"Use a fucking fork," Billy tipped his chair back to rattle around in the drawer.

Steve was trying to fit a third of his taco in his mouth, and nearly succeeding. He chewed slowly, eyes fluttering shut.

"Jonathan's back tomorrow night," Will mumbled. "I can go home. I guess."

"Custody battle," Billy sang, tossing a fork so it twanged off Will's plate. His chair thudded back to earth, and Steve paused in shoving the rest of the taco in his mouth, chewed, and swallowed.

"You can always come *back*, y'know," Steve kicked the foot of Will's chair. "He'll be here for a week or two."

"And our epic love story wouldn't be the same without letters," Billy waggled his eyebrows, then snorted as Steve blew him a kiss.

Will's chair creaked as he bounced in it. "You're gonna *write letters*?"

"They're not to *you*," Steve told him.

Billy cut off Will's excited next question with "You can't read 'em, they'll be full of me praising Harrington's dick."

Steve choked on his taco, coughed, and swallowed, as Billy grinned at his plate.

Will was hiding behind his hands. "No they won't!" He glared between them. "Not *all* of them!"

"Good ninety percent." Billy shrugged, and Steve rolled his eyes.

"You can help me write some, though," he told Will, whose chair made a smacking noise like he'd kicked his feet. "He's gonna get

bored hearing how I got knocked over in PE because I didn't *plant my feet*."

"If this is where just *anybody* knocking you over in PE leads, you better *learn*." Billy narrowed his eyes, and Steve snorted.

"You getting possessive?" Steve shoved the last of the taco in his mouth, moaning as the cheese and beef hit his tongue. "Mrum. God. S'good. Played sports my whole life, Hargrove, never kidnapped a teammate before."

"...yeah, well." Billy cleared his throat, and took a bite of taco.

That evening Billy sat weirdly quietly through a couple hours of Steve and Will teasing each other over the beginning of the Two Towers.

"Nancy said she'd rather be Legolas than Arwen, because he gets to do stuff," Will rolled his eyes, as Steve and Billy's heads popped up like groundhogs. "And then *Jonathan* said that made him *Gimli the dwarf*, which is gross."

"It is gross," Steve agreed, fighting a snicker, and Billy punched his shoulder, grinning.

"Lego-lass," he whispered, and Steve leaned into him, cackling into his shoulder.

"Crap," he snickered, "—that means I'm looking for the little shitheads with my ex and her hairy dwarf."

"And I'm...dead back there somewhere," Billy snorted. "I...I've got some homework, I'm gonna go up to my room."

Will turned his big eyes on Steve, who waved Billy on, picking through the chocolates. When Steve tried Billy's door later, and knocked, he got a "Whaddaya need, Harrington," sigh. Steve lifted his hands, and shouted back "Nothing, night!" They woke Monday morning to the sound of the garage door opening, and the Camaro engine.

“Did you guys fight? I mean, again?” Will whispered in the dark, and Steve dropped his face back in his pillows with a groan.

In his first class, Steve kept Nancy awake as her eyes drifted shut. In his third, he was glad Billy’s presence had enough of a lingering effect that he’d slept, because Jonathan was as drowsy as she was. Steve had to scribble frantically between nudging them in turn with a ruler, trying to get notes they’d actually understand.

After the bell rang for the end of fourth period—ceramics—he was ready for a break, and some quiet. So naturally, he had his tongue out the side of his mouth in concentration when Max dropped across the table, and he nearly bit it off. “Whumf,” he tried to ask, glaring.

“That’s horrible,” she said flatly. “What is it.”

‘It’ was his ceramics assignment, he tried to explain, before Eleven cut in. “They’re all like that.” She pointed at another pile of dried-up clay coils. “It looks like something a dog made.”

“Yeah, with its ass,” Max leaned closer, squinting. “Why are you all making clay dog shit?”

Steve had pulled his tongue out of his mouth with his thumb and forefinger, trying to get a good look at it. It didn’t look like any bits were missing. “Mnah. It’s a vase. And it’s a construction thing, she wants the coils to show, to make sure we did it right. I thought I’d give it to Billy.”

Max snorted. “Tell him it’s a portrait.”

“Does Billy *want* a...” Eleven trailed off, squinting at it. Steve bit back a grin, and she leaned closer to the cart full of ceramic piles of dog shit, all covered in unfired matte glaze. “Did they paint *toothpaste* on them?” She made a face at them, and leaned over Steve’s shoulder to frown.

“Anyway,” Max said, even though she couldn’t take her eyes off it, nose wrinkled, “—El wants waffles.”

"Get Billy to do it," he muttered, trying to push one of the walls of his vase upright. It slumped inward further the second time. "I kept falling asleep in this class, I have makeup work."

"Eugh." Max slumped forward, folding her arms under her head. "Hurry up and catch up, it's *snowing* again."

"Yeah, I noticed. Get Billy."

El wrinkled her nose at the awful vase. "You could give him something *nice*."

"It's *Billy*," Max groaned. "He can't wear it or drive it or drink it, so —"

"You could make him a mug." El dropped to sit next to Steve.

"Why would I make something *nice* for Billy," he felt his cheeks heat, "—this will be *hilarious*, come on, look how awful it is."

They watched him build it higher for most of the lunch hour. "Oh good," Max commented. "There's more and *more* of it. It isn't getting *any prettier*, Steve." She stopped, clearing her throat. "So..." Steve raised his eyebrows, keeping his attention on the crooked handles he was attaching, and she grimaced. "...uh, how is, uh...has he..." She trailed off, as Steve tried to figure out whether she meant "how's he doing," or "has he killed anyone?"

"*How has he killed anyone?*", *maybe*, he bit back a smirk at his project. *Probably she doesn't know what to ask either.*

"Will said he had fun." Eleven held the top of the handle, as Steve surveyed the whole, then adjusted it to be a bit more crooked.

"I can't believe you're *kissing Billy*," Max moaned into her hands. "He's *disgusting*. He put his cigarette out in his beer can once, *forgot*, went to *drink* it again, and then when he saw me watching he wouldn't back *down*, he just *drank* it! With the cigarette in there!" Eleven and Steve both made faces. Steve felt like he should...defend Billy's honor, or something, but Max was on a roll. "His room smells like a *whole basketball team* jacked off in a *garbage truck*. Made of *armpits*."

Steve snorted. "...he's been pretty clean, actually. He does the dishes all the—"

"Billy knows how to do *dishes*?" Max stared vaguely at the cupboard of glaze behind him, wide-eyed.

"Maybe it's because he likes Steve," Eleven sat her chin on the table, staring up, "—maybe—"

"He *must*, what'd you say to him," Max refocused on Steve's face.

"...to...make him do dishes?" Steve trailed off, lost. "I thanked him?"

"I *guess*, but—no, like...what'd you—at the party, he wouldn't tell me." She folded her hands together, pointing at him. "When you met. What the hell *happened*. Why would my *asshole brother*—"

"At the...party?" Steve squinted.

"Yeah, that stupid party, he was practicing in front of the mirror all afternoon—Tommy kept talking about you, and he was gonna, like, tear you off your throne. Swagger over from across the room and just—look badass, I *guess*, what'd he finally end up saying? He couldn't decide."

"...when he...came over to us? At the party? He...didn't. He just like...stalked over and stared at me and—I think he wandered off, I was with Nancy."

Max slowly folded over the table to collapse in wheezing giggles. "No—no *way*— he—he couldn't talk—he saw your face and—Steve. He couldn't *talk*. He fucking—the goddamn—the *goddamn idiot*—"

That seemed *unlikely*, but Steve tried to remember. "He and Tommy just stared at me, I didn't know what to—"

"Oh my *god*," Max cackled. "Uncool! So uncool, Billy, *weak*, *jesus christ*—oh my god—he saw your dumb face and he *couldn't make words*—"

"...so he fell in love with you?" Eleven's stomach growled.

“Yeah, sure,” Steve laughed, focusing on the stupid vase. It wasn’t as funny, suddenly. *I was gonna throw it out anyway*, he reminded himself. *He’s supposed to think it’s shitty, that’s—that’s the joke*. “He was probably too drunk.”

“Not if he was walking *around*,” Max snickered. “His feet go first, he starts stumbling all over himself—he got drunk on your *big brown eyes*, Steve. Oh my god.”

“Ha. Yeah. Shouldn’t you guys go eat lunch?”

Max staggered to her feet, still sniggering, and walked around to smack his shoulder. “I’m gonna give him *so much shit* for this. No *wonder* he climbed out the goddamn window to play house and wash your fucking *dishes*, oh my god.” She wiped her eyes. “Oh my god, Steve, my dumb brother is—like—he’s—”

“Shut up, Max,” he rolled his eyes, “—he just got distracted, he’s not —”

“No, he totally is,” she leaned in close, narrowed eyes inches from his, “—and you *want* him to be, don’t you—”

“Shut *up*, Max,” he said, through his teeth, at the vase. “Fuck off. I’ll try to get done faster, but—shut up. Seriously.”

“What? No, he *is*, really, Steve, he—”

“Let’s go,” Eleven tugged at her sleeve. “Max. We can just ask him.” Steve stared after them in horror, imagining *that* scene of carnage, but couldn’t make himself follow. *Max knows what he’s like, she’ll stop Eleven*, he told himself, and felt his cheeks flame up. He shook his head, burying his hot face in his arms. *Max is his sister, and she knows him really well*.

Tommy came and threw his arm around Steve’s shoulders as his next class ended, and Carol sat on his desk. “We got some cherry vodka,” she kicked his knee, lightly. “You could stop *crying into your pillow*—”

Tommy snickered. “*Whining over your princess*—”

“—and come get *plastered*. My mom’s got the night shift, we’ll have the house to ourselves—”

After a moment of staring, convinced they knew he’d coaxed Billy out his tower window, Steve flushed, remembering he was an idiot. “Uh, can’t tonight.”

Tommy groaned, leaning against Carol and muttering, “*Told* you he turned into a—”

Carol punched him in the shoulder, and he shoved her off the desk. She put a hand on Steve’s shoulder to steady herself, leaning in to whisper across his ear. “We know how to have a *great time* without you, your *majesty*, just wait—”

Tommy swung his hand right between their faces, and they both recoiled.

“Okay?” Steve raised his eyebrows. “Sooooo...go have an *awesome time*, woohoo?”

Carol grabbed Tommy’s hand and drug him out as the bell rang, and Steve shook his head, packing his bag, and trying to wrap his brain around the economics of the Roaring Twenties.

That afternoon, trackless snow covered the driveway, so Billy hadn’t wandered back yet. Steve pulled in, flapped his arm back to find his bag, then unhooked his seatbelt to wedge himself between the seats and grab for it. A siren beeped in the driveway behind him.

When he slowly lifted his head, El was waving wildly through Hopper’s windshield, nearly elbowing a grinning Mike in the face. Hopper sauntered over, surveying the front of Steve’s house. *He’s seen me*, Steve thought, *he’ll yank me out if I crawl under the seats*.

“Just getting home?” Hopper raised his eyebrows as Steve climbed out, and Steve nodded.

“Yeah. Uh. I’m doing some—extra credit.” He tried to be subtle wiping his palms on his pants. “Is—is something wrong?”

Hopper frowned at the ground, and scratched his stubble. “Been having some real interesting conversations, the last few days.”

Steve laughed through his rising dread, grabbing his backpack off the seat and locking his car. “Okay...”

“El was hoping you’d come for pizza. In the next couple days. You and the Hargrove kid.”

Steve swallowed, and cleared his throat. “I—I guess, yeah?”

She’d leaned over to honk the horn, and Mike was wrestling with her, but she still waved. They were both laughing. Steve took a deep breath, and shrugged. “Sure. I’ll—I’ll talk to him.”

“Probably oughtta meet the kid taking my girl out for waffles,” Hopper side-eyed him, mouth quirked, and Steve scrabbled at his hair.

“She can break his fingers, I figured.” He snuck a dry-mouthed glance at Hopper’s gun, wondering when he’d switched from imagining it as protection against monsters, to picturing Billy Hargrove with a bullet hole in his head.

“Kid,” Hopper dropped a heavy hand on his shoulder. “—she’s trying hard to sell me on your boy. I’m not your enemy, here.”

Your boy reverberated around Steve’s head while Hopper drove away, and Steve cupped his hands over his face, paced in a circle in the snow, and blew deep breaths into his fingers. He leaned against the bumper of his car, watching the road, then stalked around in another circle, rubbing his arms, before heading to Ms. Williams with Billy’s mom’s phone number burning a hole in his pocket. Afterwards, once he’d changed the burned-out bulbs in her recessed ceiling fixtures, so she wouldn’t have to stand on a ladder, and put the boxes of Christmas decorations in her crawlspace, she came over and patted his elbow.

Steve was hugging the head of the nearest dog goodbye.

“My darling...saw a lot out there,” she said, folding her gnarled hands. “Hawkins has always been...Hawkins. My sweetie *talked* to

someone, you know? It helped to...talk it out. Maybe you should think about it.” She was smiling at the dog, where it was wriggling harder against his chest, and he didn’t feel the internal bristle he had when Nancy brought it up.

“Maybe *Billy* should,” he muttered, into short warm fur.

“Maybe he should too,” she agreed.

When he got home, Billy’s car still wasn’t there. Steve let himself in, taking a deep breath of the lingering smell of lasagna, and cologne, and just...*it smells less stale. You’d think somebody lived here.* He took the stairs three at a time, figuring he’d try to get his remaining homework out of the way before Billy arrived, and turned on the landing to find his door broken. It was hanging crooked on one hinge. There was a smear of what looked like *blood* on it, and he slammed into it, shouting for Billy. He threw the bathroom door open, and Billy’s bedroom, crawled around on the floor to make sure he wasn’t *lying* somewhere, under a bed, and then took a deep breath. “You fucking bastard,” he yelled, “—if you’re in here, you *answer me.*” The house stayed quiet. Steve rubbed his face, took a deep breath, and ran downstairs. He turned toward the garage, then back, and frowned at the table, before stalking over to snatch up the note. “Sorry about the door,” he read aloud, “—went out to calm my shit. Back late or tomorrow morning.” Steve dropped into a chair, banging his elbow on the table. He didn’t feel it. ““There’s still lasagna.’...jesus, Billy.”

When the walkie-talkie came on, Steve was supposed to be editing his essay. Mostly, he was holding his pencil between his nose and his upper lip, staring at the ceiling, and trying to focus enough to hear the characters on *Dallas*. “Harrington,” came Billy’s voice, and Steve flailed off the couch and ran to the kitchen, frowning around. “...Harrington,” Billy called again. “...pick up, Steve Harrington. Sorry I broke your door.”

Steve grabbed up the walkie-talkie from the hook by the door and

flopped back on the couch, grinning. He pressed the button. "Hargrove."

"Pick up, pick up," Billy was crooning. His voice sounded soft, and a little slurred. "Talk to me, your majesty—oh. Over."

"Jesus, I'm here, idiot, shut up. You have to click the button. Over."

"You're *talking* to me." Billy sounded so *happy* about it, Steve's heart gave a weird thump, and he rolled against the back of the couch to cover his hot face, listening to Billy mumble. "...m sorry I broke your door."

He forgot again. Steve shook his head, waiting for the eventual "Over." He grinned, holding the walkie-talkie with both hands. "Yeah, what the hell? You okay, honeymustard? Dick?" There was a long pause, and Steve sat up. "Babe? Oh, sorry, over."

"...I think, yeah. Yeah, I'm over," Billy mumbled back, and Steve sighed, letting himself drop back against the couch again.

He leaned to click off the TV. "Thanks for leaving a note, moron. Go 'head."

"...shit. Sorry about the door," Billy's voice dropped to a whisper. "Sorry."

"I'm not mad!" Steve clicked it off to groan loudly, then clicked it back on with a frown of concentration. "I'm not mad, Billy Hargrove. Okay?"

"Your car was there and I yelled for you. I thought..."

"You fucking thought I was ignoring you. Yeah. You know what, the doorknob works. I mean, it did, before you *broke* it. Jesus, Hargrove. I'm not—" he took a deep breath, and punched a pillow. "—you scared the *shit* out of me, you—you fucking—*shithead bastard*, I thought your dad came and—" Steve pressed his eyelids, swallowing, until he could breathe smoothly again. "I thought he *took* you, you—you *goddamn fuck*. I was about to go over there with a *bat*, I—I thought he *drug you out*."

“Shit.” Billy paused. “Nope. I’m...I’m at Tommy’s, I...think.” He hummed, considering, and Steve laughed, and wiped his eyes. “Does Tommy...have...ruffles. Ruffly...canopy bed?”

“I *hope* so,” Steve told him, earnestly, and Billy started giggling. “If it’s yellow check, though, no, you’re at Carol’s.”

“M at Carol’s,” Billy repeated. “...okay.”

After another pause, he said “Huh,” and Steve laughed harder against the back of the couch. “You need a ride, Hargrove?”

“...kinda drunk,” Billy informed him, in a stage whisper, and Steve tried not to cackle.

“Yeah, shithead, I can *tell*—”

“I am ex—I’m—I’m *just as* drunk as I need to be,” Billy announced, as Steve wandered over to the door and started pulling on shoes. “Tommy...” he huffed, “—Ha-Harrington, y’know...Tommy, he...”

Steve bit his lips together, raising his eyebrows, and wondered what tragedy Drunk Billy would think deserved that level of gravity. “Tommy found my *condoms*,” Billy sighed. “They were *flavored*. I’m—I’m over.”

Steve, flapping an arm for his jacket sleeve, almost fell into the wall laughing. “You dumbshit,” he snorted. “At least you *bought* some. They’ll sell *more*, y’know, go ahead.”

“It was *banana*. Steve Harrington. Talk.”

“Yeah, okay,” Steve shook his head, grabbing his keys, and a dorky bobble-headed ski hat with a matching scarf. “We can find you more banana condoms, babe. Go.”

“He put it on and pretended to be King Kong,” Billy mumbled. “He beat his chest. Preten—pretended she was, y’know. The blonde. Think I was a hunter? I don’t—don’t even know.”

Steve cracked up laughing, stumbled, and had to lean against his door. “Wait, what? You—you all—all *three* of you? Yeah, okay, I

see why you needed to get bombed. You *and* Tommy *and* Carol?! Christ. You okay? Go on."

"Shut up, like you—you never—*never*? Over."

"Never have I *ever*," Steve snorted. "Ever. God, how did that even happen? They tried to lure me over there earlier, did they jump you, or...?"

"I drunk to forget," Billy said muzzily, then snorted into the microphone.

Steve winced at the loud gust of static, and flipped on the porch light, listening to Billy ramble.

"Harrington. Monkey noises. He kept—he wouldn't stop—he *Tarzan* yelled the whole time, Harrington—it's—it's all—made me vibrate. In there."

"Shut up, Jesus, I'm jogging, keep making me laugh and I'll trip. Eugh." Steve focused on Billy's voice, and not the falling snow. It was compressed to ice on the sidewalk, so he trotted out to run in the road, with an eye out for headlights. "You okay, though? Your turn."

"He tasted like a plastic banana," Billy whined. Steve waited, smiling. "...what? You're...on a run? Why—what time..." There was some scuffling, and a static-y groan from Billy's end. "...god, I can't—I'm gonna puke."

"Then go puke," Steve panted, foggy in the streetlights. "Just click off first."

"I don't want to," Billy groaned. "...over."

"That's okay," Steve snorted. "*Are* you okay? Go ahead."

"...never okay," Billy laughed. It sounded wet. "I'm not—even Will could fucking tell, shit, Harrington. Thought—I thought, y'know. I thought we were okay. Thought he was...fine, with me. Some of your kids, they're—Max hates me, but El. Will. Thought they didn't. Not as—not as much."

"Oh, damn," Steve grimaced, turtling his shoulders so his scarf warmed his face. "Hargrove—"

Billy'd forgotten to click off his mike, so he couldn't hear. "I know they're—they're not *dumb*. Not gonna decide I'm *great* from a few waffles. All I got are waffles. I could tell he gave me the *dipshit* character, but he was *useful* sometimes—"

Oh my god, Steve couldn't help snickering. "Babe."

"—and he could fight better than your dumb impotent ass—"

"Oy, we fixed my sword," Steve told the walkie-talkie, since Billy wasn't listening.

"—even if he was all 'wish my brother *Faramax* was here, he can read,' I mean, I—I think I—my knight—he's pretty dumb—Will had *that* right—"

Steve slowed to a walk, checking the intersection for traffic, and laughing. "You are thinking way too hard here—"

"—I remembered to bring firewood up the mountain. The lil fairies would have died, Harrington. Will and you and Wizard Hopper."

"I can't *reply*, lamebrain, so I don't know what you want from me," Steve told the walkie-talkie, jogging again.

"Been frozen. Frozen to *death*. And I made a path with you. Together, through the snow. We made a path for the *kids*."

"You are absolutely *wasted*, sweet...mustard," Steve pushed his hood down, starting to sweat. He yanked his scarf off and stuffed it in a pocket, without slowing.

"...but I'm really just—I'm evil, right?" Billy sighed in a burst of static. "An—an' I don't like women. I guess. Elfs. Hey. Steveagorn," he whispered. "You hooked up with Nancy in those woods, right? The Loathly Elf Woods."

"I want a lawyer," Steve said to nobody, after rolling his eyes.

“And then I tried to beat up a kid,” Billy yelled, “—*again*, I tried to beat Will up and take his stupid *magic ring* and I *scared* him—Harrington,” his voice dropped to a whisper, “...this phone isn’t plugged in to anything.”

“Christ,” Steve resisted the urge to shake the walkie-talkie, and ran faster.

“...why’s Carol have a toy phone,” Billy mumbled. “So dumb. I’m talking into a plastic baby phone, your majesty. You’ll never know, right. Can’t hear dumb Billy on his toy phone.” He sniffled. “Kid’s’re smarter. Will could tell, he knew I was *scary*, he—he knew. He knew I’d have to be put down. I’m weak and I—I fucking—die, right? Kid gets the ring and he’s fine for—for years. Billy Hargrove stands next to him for two days and loses his fucking mind. That’s my shit ending. I’m the—the fucking *weak link*.”

“It’s a *walkie-talkie*, Hargrove, you fucking moron, click the *button*,” Steve yelled, and a light came on in a house after he passed, but he was listening to what sounded like Billy Hargrove starting to cry, and he put on a burst of speed. “He said you die saving them, you dipshit,” he told Billy, knowing he couldn’t hear.

By the time he turned into the right driveway, Billy was mumbling at random again. “God. This...this is *thick*—”

“Sure it is,” Steve snorted, tiptoeing through the snow to Carol’s door, and patting the top of the door for the spare key.

“I think this is...creme de menthe and...maybe Fra Angelico? S’disgusting.”

“Stop *drinking* it,” Steve hissed, leaning inside. He coughed on a cloud of marijuana smoke. “Hargrove!” he stage-whispered, and the walkie-talkie sighed with a burst of static.

“...I hear Steve Harrington on this toy phone,” Billy whispered back,

He finally clicked the button, probably, because Steve heard a muffled “Fuck me,” from upstairs when he asked “Where’re Tommy and Carol? Click the button when you’re done talking, Hargrove.”

“...in the shower..?” Billy hummed. “...I hear a shower.”

“I think I found your pants,” Steve informed him, picking up the crumpled pile on the stairs. “D’you see your shirt anywhere?”

“...your sweatshirt..?” Billy mumbled. “...where is Steve’s sweatshirt.”

“Are you asking the floor?” Steve grinned, scooping up another lump of fabric, squinting at it in the dark, and finally giving it a sniff. It smelled like beer, but he tucked it in his arm. *In case I can’t find more clothes, it’ll—*

“Too goddamn...bombed to look for clothes, Harrington. I’ll get it. Find—find it. Bring it tomorrow.”

Steve could hear Billy in both ears, creeping up the stairs—and the shower, which was reassuring, since he figured Carol would be completely justified losing her *shit* if she found Steve Harrington tiptoeing around in her *bedroom* in the dead of night. He poked his head in her room, snorted at the piled blankets on the floor, and the bra on the doorknob, and crept around the bed to see Billy, naked, on his back.

Billy tried to wave a bottle, and it slid through his fingers, making a conk noise against his cheek before it rolled away.

Steve tried not to laugh. He grabbed it, crouching, and caught Billy’s flailing fingers, surveying his sweaty, sticky, tanned skin in the low light of the lamp on Carol’s bedside table. “Hey, Hargrove,” he whispered, turning the walkie-talkie off, and stuffing it in his jacket pocket. “Didn’t that hurt? You too numb?”

“Steve isn’t here.” Billy squinted up, smiling. He held up the other walkie-talkie, and dropped it on his chest with a thud. “He’s on the phone.”

“Nope,” Steve winced, laughing, and grabbed it, looking around for Billy’s bag, “—he came to get you. Stop waving things, cupcake...pie, that’s gonna hurt tomorrow—”

Billy swallowed. “No, no, we didn’t—we aren’t telling. I’m a fucking

mess, go away—”

“Yeah,” Steve leaned across him to grab the bag, kissing his fingers before letting them go, “—can you get to the bathroom? It’s right there—”

“They’re in there. Harrington. They’re—they’re probably. Screwing.”

“Yeah, but they’ve seen your naked ass already, right? Go on, you can clean up a little.”

“...gonna puke,” Billy muttered. “M seeing...Steves. I should stop drinking. Go away, I’ll stop.”

“Probably should,” Steve agreed, lifting pieces of clothing between two extended fingers, and trying to remember whose they were. “...serves Carol right if I haul you home stuffed in one of her turtlenecks,” he muttered, and Billy snorted, rolling onto his side to snicker silently. “...go puke if you need to, Hargrove.” Steve patted his hair, after checking for any visible...disgusting reasons he wouldn’t want to, and Billy laughed harder, nodding.

“You can’t be here,” he grinned up. “Nobody’s telling Steve. Nobody. Tommy won’t tell Steve and Carol won’t tell—” his eyes widened, and his voice dropped to a whisper. “*I told Steve.* On—” he batted at the walkie-talkie. “On Carol’s toy phone.” He flailed his arm, then dropped it over his face.

“This was supposed to be secret?” Steve rifled through another pile of clothes, feeling an internal twist he hadn’t before, when he’d figured Billy was just at his usual bullshit. “What, is this a regular thing, just keep it from Steve? Big old secret from Steve. Great. That’s great, that’s—that’s really excellent, screw you, Hargrove—”

“Okay,” Billy mumbled, just as a Tarzan yell came from the bathroom, and the guttural, slurred words “C’mere, kitten, Koko’s ready for you.”

Steve choked on a horrified snicker, and Billy groaned, and rolled to grab the bottle of thick brownish-green liqueur.

“Not drunk enough,” he muttered, and Steve grabbed it back, trying not to cackle.

“Stop, dickface, look what *happens*—”

“Help. Help, ’m in *Planet of the Apes*... they’re gonna want me gone.” Billy paused to squint at him, “...Harrington? Why’re you...”

“Jesus,” Steve grabbed his hand, “—lemme pull you up, let’s get you out of here—”

Max was right, Steve realized, bewildered, as he tried to pull Hargrove upright, and had to catch at his waist when none of his joints supported weight. *His words work, but his feet don’t.*

“Sorry,” he moaned, covering his mouth and slumping against Steve’s legs, and Steve crouched again.

“...you’re like a water balloon,” he whispered back. “Don’t you have bones? A beer balloon.”

“Is it morning..?” Billy asked muzzily, and Steve groaned.

“Let’s get some clothes on your naked ass,” he said, getting an arm around Billy’s shoulders, and holding him upright enough to yank him into the Hardy Boys t-shirt he’d found in the blankets of Carol’s bed. Billy tried to help, which made it take longer, but eventually he had Billy Hargrove poured mostly into a t-shirt and jeans. The only socks he found had yellow pompoms, but he pulled them on Billy’s shivering feet.

“Sorry you’re late for class,” Billy grinned up at him, and Steve’s lips thinned, as he wondered why he wasn’t even *annoyed*, except with Tommy and Carol. He let Billy drag him back down for a kiss, and tried not to make too obvious a face—both at the sticky-sweet mint and almond taste of what Billy’d been drinking, and the thought that his mouth might have been on Tommy or Carol’s mouth *or worse*, and he hadn’t brushed his teeth. Billy’s description of the taste of banana condom popped into his head, and he shuddered—*I think the worst I’ve done drunk was...however I ended up in that parking lot, that one time*, Steve thought, trying to remember as he hefted Billy to prop

him against the bedpost, and turned to piggyback him. Another Tarzan yell, this time in unison, came from the bathroom, and Steve and Billy both twitched. *At least I never woke up like this*, Steve told himself, feeling accomplished.

“Probably your sweatshirt came off *first*, if your jeans were on the stairs,” Steve thought aloud, and Billy swung a loose fist at his shoulder.

“...’syour sweatshirt. Dumbass.”

“Right.” Steve narrowed his eyes. “Let’s go hunt it down.” He scooped Billy’s bag up from the floor, and the bottle of gross alcohol.

“Favorite,” Billy mumbled into his neck.

When they got down the stairs, Steve sat Billy in front of the toilet. “You should probably throw up, Hargrove.” Once Billy was wedged between the wall and the toilet, and facing basically the right way, Steve snuck off to look for his sweatshirt, listening for the shower above. He found it with a leopard-print condom packet on it, and shook his head, stuffing the condom in his pocket. The bottle he dumped down the sink—*what’s wrong with beer*, he thought, cringing—shook clean, and filled with water, before to returning to rub Billy’s back and get him to rinse his mouth.

“...probably should stop,” Billy eyed it, and spat, wiping his mouth.

“No, come on, drink some,” Steve unscrewed the lid, and held it up, sliding his other hand up the back of Billy’s head.

Billy didn’t argue, but he pressed back away from it, turning his head.

“Come on, if I have to make little airplane noises, I will,” Steve swished around in the bottle.

“...’f I drink that much vodka, I’ll die,” Billy said in a flat voice, eyes flicking to Steve’s face. “I know I’m—”

“Shit, no, it’s water,” Steve stared at him, “—just water, from the sink. So you won’t be as hungover. Okay?”

Billy's expression didn't change, but he let Steve tip up the bottle and give him a few swallows before he pulled away again.

"You okay?" Steve tucked a few wild curls behind Billy's ear.

"Fine, just. Jus'...just a goddamn mess," Billy told the toilet, laughing, and Steve leaned his face in his hand. "'Cause you're the king, and I'm the weak link."

"Christ. He was a *knight*, babe. He died saving the little guys, remember?"

"...nope," Billy accepted another few swallows, and took a shaky breath. "F-funny how that tastes like vodka, Steve Harrington, you—you sure it won't—"

"If I'm the king, I can say you're a knight, right?" Steve tried, leaning to catch his eye. "I can just say 'This is William of Hargrove, my knight—'"

Billy started giggling, leaning his cheek on the edge of the toilet bowl, and Steve pulled him back. "This sweatshirt a favor, King Harrington?"

"Yes? Sure?" Steve agreed with whatever made Billy grin like that, though it was hard getting him *in* the sweatshirt, with him slumped half in Steve's lap. It was easier getting him in the scarf and bobblehat, and Steve didn't even bother with shoes. He'd grab them on the way out, he hoped.

"—'m I your favorite knight?" Billy mumbled, and Steve kissed his cheek, hauling him upright, and hoisting him again, so Billy's mouth rested against his ear. "You can say no, not gonna remember much."

"What? Jesus, you're heavy," Steve stopped, heard the upstairs bathroom door open, and leapt for the door. He locked it hurriedly, plonking the key back in its place, and hoping they didn't notice the melting snow his shoes had left. "Where'd you park, babe?"

"Why is *my* car here," Billy asked, and Steve sighed, squinting under streetlights for the Camaro as he tromped along the street.

“Shit. You are *smashed*, sweet—dickhead—”

“Sir,” Billy corrected, his drunk breath warm against Steve’s ear.
“Sir...Sir William, right.”

“Y’know, if you won’t remember. You take too damn long in the bathroom, *Sir William Hargrove*. You’re already pretty, let somebody else get their hair done.”

“Prettier than you,” Billy snorted.

“You’re such a prick. Can’t believe you had wild monkey sex with *Tommy and Carol*—”

“I can’t either,” Billy groaned. “Thank fuck...won’t remember. I’m your favorite knight, though. Tell me tomorrow—”

“Yeah, I’ll tell you tomorrow. Give you a sweatshirt again.”

“Okay.” Billy nuzzled his neck, and Steve ducked his head, grinning.

“There’s been—there’s been a lot, uh. I talked to your mom? She loves you. I’ll tell you that tomorrow, too.”

“What,” Billy’s voice cracked.

“God. I got home and—I thought your dad drug you out of the fucking house, asshole. I’d—I’d have—I’d have stormed the fucking castle.” Steve took a deep breath. “I—I’m—pretty sure the sheriff knows we’re screwing?”

“What the fuck,” Billy hissed, arms tightening around Steve’s neck and shoulders. Steve let go of Billy’s leg to adjust Billy’s bag around his neck, and something sticky rubbed his hand. To his disgust, he pulled out a condom-covered banana. “Uh,” he said.

“Shit, I don’t *think* so,” Billy mumbled. “*Hope* not, god damn.”

Steve sighed, tossing it over his shoulder, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I—I think I’m falling in *fucking* love with you, Knight Banana Ass.”

“Jesus christ. 'S my car, get me in, Harrington. King. Need...need something to write that down with.”

Steve started laughing so hard he almost fell, and Billy smacked his shoulder.

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: There's a scene Steve thinks Billy has been attacked, but he hasn't. Billy does get very drunk and has safe sex he's embarrassed about.

Thank you so much for wandering in! Lemme know if you liked my story--I lovelovelove hearing from people! Kudos! Short comments! Long comments! Questions! Constructive criticism! Comments as extra kudos! Thanks so, so much! XD

(I try to reply to each one, but if you don't want a response to your comment then please say "No reply please" or "Whisper" so I'll know not to reply.)

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My friends and I all had different ideas of which was Steve's best declaration this chapter...he tries hard so many times...anybody have a vote? XD

10. Uncrossing Wires

Summary for the Chapter:

Communication finally happens, of a sort. Billy starts meeting more of the Goonies, to his regret, and Steve gives horrible presents. Sex under the Christmas lights.

Trying to stick to the chapter count made this chapter reeeaaally long! Leave a note for your loved ones, in case they try to send search and rescue while you read! There's some sweetness in here to warm you this December!

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: Some slurs, makeshift lube, and Billy does some inadvisable things that lead to them talking about what they want from a relationship. See end notes for details! ETA: Horizontal line before sex scenes! There are a few in here, and they've got some important dialogue, sorry to people who aren't into that!

Piggybacking would have been easier, Steve thought, if Billy was either out cold, or in any kind of control of his limbs. He yanked a leg loose, waving his arm towards the door of his Camaro, and Steve hissed “You—*drunk ass*. Knight. Hold it—hold the hell up—*Hargrove*—lemme get the door open, you’ll fall.”

“Gonna let me fall, Harrington?” Billy giggled in his ear, in a gust of alcoholic breath, but threw his arm back around Steve’s neck and shoulder. “Sssh.”

Steve rolled his eyes, leaning back to squish Billy’s butt against the side of the Camaro, so he could rummage through Billy’s bag for his keys. “I hope your keys are in here, you goddamn *trespasser*—”

“Thought I was your knight,” Billy whispered against Steve’s neck,

flapping an arm at the bag.

“Sir Knight,” Steve agreed, his attention catching on Billy’s bruised, bloodied knuckles. “Shit, your hand—”

“Killed the door.” Billy stuck his hand out, so they could both admire it.

“You sure did,” Steve grabbed it, wagging the swollen fingers, and Billy didn’t try to escape—just hummed in his ear—but then he was probably numb to the world. Steve patted Billy’s bag down, rifling through the outside pocket, then sticking his hand in to bump into what turned out to be half the bottle of cherry vodka, and an unopened bottle of scotch.

“S’bad, it should go in the trunk,” Billy muttered.

“What?”

“In the trunk in the dark, where the bad shit goes,” Billy laughed, and Steve stopped shaking the bag, listening for keys, to squish Billy harder against the side of the car, and lean in to kiss his face.

“Where are your keys, Baby Ruth? Knight?”

“Dumbshit nicknames. Sir. Babe,” Billy slurred, letting go of Steve’s shoulders to lean back against the car and pat the pockets of his jeans down. “Here.” He yanked a few times, then dropped his keys in the snow, and Steve sighed. “Shit,” Billy giggled. “Dropped ‘em, your—your kingship.”

“Yeah, yeah, you did.”

“Don’t put me in the trunk. Harrington. Majesty. Don—don’t throw me in. There.” His voice dropped to a stage whisper. “’s dark.”

“Christ. Hang on, babe.” Steve gritted his teeth as he slowly crouched to retrieve them, his thighs protesting the additional weight of Billy Hargrove on his back. “The hell d’you mean, that’s where *bad shit* goes?” The snow numbed his hands further, and he had to grab at them twice.

“Garbage goes in the *trunk*,” Billy whispered again.

“Well, glad you cleared that up,” Steve rolled his eyes, almost dropping the keys *again* just as he grabbed them, because Billy shifted sideways on his back, feet kicking, and almost tipped them both over. Steve grabbed the car, panting, and unlocked the door, scrabbling to open it. “Here you go, Sir Beefcake, god, you weigh like —” He staggered back as Billy yanked on his head, kissing his ear.

The car roof froze his fingers as Steve flailed at it, steadying them, before carefully turning and crouching to nudge their butts in the open door, and deposit Billy in the passenger seat. Problem was, Billy didn’t let go, and Steve ended up sprawled on top of him across the front seats of the Camaro.

“...ow,” Billy muttered into his ear. “Nng. Gearshift.”

“Let go, dipshit,” Steve wrested himself free from Billy’s biceps, and Billy grabbed at his hands and clothes.

“No, Harrington, you—you said,” Billy laughed, swallowing. “Wait, wait, *Harrington*, don’t, come on—”

Steve widened his eyes at the roof of the car, then squeezed them shut, clenching his jaw, and *didn’t say anything*, particularly anything that involved yelling about the *hour* and his *feet in the snow* and *Billy Hargrove being himself*. He let himself go a little limp. Billy’s claw-fingers loosened against his shirt and neck, and Steve kept his voice even. “Whatcha need, banana-dick?”

“...no...mmm...s’was Tommy, not—I think I was some—fruit. Some *other* fruit? Watermelon? Chair. Cherries? You smell like...uhhh, coconut, Harrington—” He let go to count fruits off on his fingers, and Steve grabbed the edge of the open door to pull himself out, then leaned in again, running a finger along where Billy’s back hit the gearshift and handbrake.

“It’s my shampoo,” Steve snorted, shaking his head. “You break your spine, there?”

“Yeah.” Billy’s smile was soft under the streetlights, and Steve

resisted the urge to crawl back up and kiss him, even if he was fucking annoying, and covered in jizz.

“I’m gonna put all this booze you stole in the trunk like you said,” Steve leaned in to press a kiss where Billy’s stomach showed, then tug the sweatshirt down, and tuck it between him and the handbrake. “You—you know you’re the *good* shit, right.”

“Don’t put me in there,” Billy tried to smack his hand away, and missed.

“No, listen. You’re good, okay? You’re—you’re...top shelf?” Steve screwed up his mouth, thinking hard, and Billy cracked up, turning his head to giggle into the back of the drivers’ seat. “Besides, come on, the trunk? I was out cold, but that had to be your sister’s idea, she’s a little *gangster*, remember, I bet—she probably *always* wanted to shove somebody in a trunk, you’re lucky it wasn’t, like, cement shoes, you’re lucky you weren’t next to some dead horse’s head—”

Billy cackled harder against the seat, but waved a hand at him, and Steve grabbed it, and gave it a squeeze. “Come here. Harrington. You’re so dumb,” Billy whispered. “King Steve, King Steve—”

Steve groaned. He picked up Billy’s legs and pom-pom socked feet, dusting off a little snow, and tucked all of Billy Hargrove into the car. When he shut the passenger’s side door, both yellow socked feet pressed against the window.

The lock on the Camaro’s trunk was frosty, and the car bounced on its tires a couple of times, jarring the key out of his numb hand as he tried to turn it. The bouncing wasn’t rhythmic, so he hoped Billy still had pants on, at least. Finally, the trunk popped open—*like Billy would even fit in there*, Steve thought, frowning in at the scattered textbooks, and half-squashed bag lunch taking up nearly the entire tiny trunk of the Camaro. *I’d have to leave it open, bungee-cord him in, and put a warning flag on his feet*. He tossed the bottles in. The picture album was still in there, and he paused, biting his lips, then slammed the trunk shut and shivered.

Carol's bedroom light came on, and he could hear voices. He rubbed his arms, crunching around to the drivers' side, wiping the snow off the windows to find Billy rummaging in the glove compartment. He got the key in the door, and it wouldn't turn, so he knocked on the window. It wasn't too frosted over, but in the dim light of the streetlights, he had to squint. Billy waved him away, bent over a little notebook, and Steve banged harder with the flat of his hand. "Trespasser William," he hissed through the window. "Open up."

Billy frowned at him, wrote another word, and shook his skinned-up hand in the air, wincing.

"Billiam Hargrove," Steve smacked the window some more, "—lemme in, come on, shit, it's cold as ass out here—I'll shampoo your hair. Babe. Come on. Come on come on come on—"

Billy twitched. He bit his lips, frowning at the notepad, and Steve blew on his fingers, wishing he'd brought gloves.

"William Whatever Hargrove, open this goddamn door, or—or I'll—I'll microwave an orange. So help me god."

Billy flashed over a grin, trying to grasp the pencil with his scabbed hand, and Steve rattled the handle, stomping his feet.

"Come on. Just reach over and unlock it. Lemme in." The key still wouldn't turn, and he grimaced, trying to test its limits without being left with a broken chunk of key. When Billy *still* ignored him, he stuck the key in his mouth, and started stomping in a circle in the snow, wishing he hadn't handed over the bobble hat. Every time his hands got warm enough to pull them from under his arms, he knocked some more.

Finally, Billy scooted his butt over, thumping his legs into the gearshift, and licked the window under Steve's hand. "My pencil broke," he shouted against the window.

Steve took the key out of his mouth, trying it in the lock. It didn't turn. "Sir Idiot Hargrove," Steve smacked the window again, "—open up."

Billy scooted closer, batting at the seatbelt, and pressed the notepad to the window. His handwriting was suffering, what with his scabbed-up, swollen hand, but he'd managed to scribble *Steve thinks falling in love yo*, ending in a long dark smutch. Billy pressed a broken-tipped pencil next to it. Steve dropped to a crouch in the snow, rubbing his face with a groan.

Billy knocked at the inside of the window—the car rocked as he clonked his knee into the steering wheel—and pressed his face against the window, calling “Harrington! Where did you go, come back—” and Steve stuck a hand up and waved, rifling the backpack.

He stepped back from the window, wagging the Sharpie he'd found at Billy, who thumped around trying to roll down the window, then finally opened the door, nearly falling out in the snow. Steve caught him with a hand on his back, and pushed him back inside, while Billy tried to grab the Sharpie. Once he got them both inside, Billy leaning awkwardly against his shoulder, the bobble hat tickling his cheek, Steve yanked the door shut. He leaned back against the seat, rubbing his hands together and blowing on them.

“Gimme the marker, Harrington,” Billy whispered, patting at his arm. “Less you *want* me to forget. Dickhead. Shitface. Liar.”

Steve tucked his chin to kiss Billy's head. “Y'know actually, you're right, I change my mind. Hell with you.”

“Have—have to tease you tomorrow. Tommy, Steve says he *loves* me. Loves me *more*—”

“Let's write ‘you had sex with King Kong,’—”

“No, fuckhead, you—” Billy lowered the notepad, grimacing. “...fuck you.”

“I meant it,” Steve whispered against his ear. “I've *been* in love before, I know what this is.”

“I need *evidence*—full of *shit*—” Billy growled, batting a hand for the sharpie. “You—you're just saying shit 'cause you know I'm so—I'm so fucked up—”

“Jesus. Here, lemme get it. What do you want me to write?”

“What you *said*,” Billy snorted, whacking him with the notepad. “Can’t just say this *bullshit* to me, face *consequences*. Mom loves me. You l—” he snickered, rubbing his stubble against Steve’s neck, along with a sloppy kiss. “You—you’re an *idiot*. Does *Hopper* love me too, pretty boy?”

“Not much,” Steve’s cheeks flamed as he grabbed Billy’s unresisting arm and carefully penned ‘YOUR MOM ♥ YOU’, and Billy took a shaky breath, biting his lips as he side-eyed Steve. Steve went with ‘HOPPER KNOWS’ underneath, the coward’s route, and Billy swung his right arm over, smacking it into Steve’s hands. Steve swallowed, studying Billy’s swollen, bloodied hand, and Billy elbowed him.

“...not gonna say something like that if I’ll remember, your *majesty*?” His voice was rough.

“No, *what*?” Steve swallowed, laughing. “No, I—I’m on it.” He grabbed Billy’s wrist—slightly warmer than his, since he’d gotten Billy inside the car—and wrote ‘U R MY KNIGHT’. Billy laughed, and Steve squeezed the Sharpie, shutting his eyes.

“Go on.”

“...yeah,” Steve nodded, opening his eyes to stare at the Sharpie, and Billy’s arm.

“Screw you,” Billy pulled away, grabbing at the keys, “—don’t lie, Herring—Harrington. Get out, go around, you—you can’t drive stick, remember, my—my *king*. Harrington. Don’t—say anything else, don’t say *shit* to me, I’ll—I’ll feed it back to you—” He rubbed his face, swallowing, and smacked his sore hand over Steve’s face when he opened his mouth.

Steve tried to shake his head away, then just grabbed Billy’s arm again, and wrote ‘STEVE HAS FEELINGS’ except something must’ve tickled Billy’s elbow, and he jerked.

“Try again. Do it again.” He stuck his hand out, and Steve rubbed his face, groaning.

"If I—if I write—*that*, you'll just beat me up *tomorrow* thinking it was some asshole joke."

"*Good*, you—you fucking *liar*—" Billy elbowed him, flailing his busted hand at the Sharpie. "*Consequences*."

"No, listen—" Steve grabbed his face, "—listen. Dickhead. What do I even write?"

"It's not like it's *true*, just—just fucking—" Billy yanked at his hands, trying to pull away, and Steve pulled him closer, remembering at the last moment that Billy'd drunk some horrible hodgepodge of hazelnut and mint liquor, probably the cherry vodka Carol'd mentioned earlier, and possibly bananas, and then *puked* it, and he redirected his kisses to Billy's freckles, and the soft curls hanging nearly in his eyes.

"Hargrove," he whispered, and Billy nodded, tipping his head to try and kiss his mouth, "—Sir Hargrove." Billy laughed against his cheek. "I—I do, I—" Steve gritted his teeth, swallowing, and ran his thumb up Billy's smooth-shaven cheek. "I—god *damn* it. I *like* like you like a fucking third-grader, okay, tell me what to say. To you. Tomorrow. 'Cause right now I sound like a fucking idiot."

"What," Billy snorted. "*You're* an idiot." He curled closer, squishing his ribs between Steve and the steering wheel, and Steve realized they were absolutely going to freeze to death in the car. "Guess—I guess telling me sweet shit so I won't remember's better than—" Billy cut off, laughing against Steve's neck, and Steve hugged him out of habit, before trying to push him back.

"Lemme get us going, dingus. It's freezing—"

"Could warm you up," Billy whispered, running his fingers down Steve's throat, and biting gently against his jaw. Steve's dick twitched in his pants, his whole body turning toward Billy Hargrove like the moron had switched on an internal electromagnet.

"Holy shit," Steve panted back, glad he hadn't been driving. "Shit, no, I mean, later, maybe. Let's go home, okay?"

“No, don’t—not home—don’t throw me out—” Billy laughed. “No, your house, Steve Harrington’s house. It’s nice,” he let himself be pushed back towards the passenger seat, biting at Steve’s fingers, “—come on, Harrington, fuck me in—in the fort. You don’t...we’ll have to be *super quiet* in my room, majesty. Fuck—fuck my mouth to keep me quiet. Ssssh.” He giggled, pulling at Steve’s jacket. “He’s gonna *hear* us. Crash in with an axe all ‘here’s Johnny!’”

Steve stared at him. “Holy shit. No, *my* home, where you *live*, asshole.”

“Like *The Shining*,” Billy mumbled. “Break the door. Kill us.”

“I *hate* your dad.”

“He just wants what’s *best for this family*,” Billy snorted, then started giggling. “No. No, he wouldn’t kill us, he can’t—he can’t lemme make him *that* mad, it’d upset *Susan*. He doesn’t—he doesn’t wanna be the, uh, the husband who upsets his *wife*, Harrington.”

“Murder is upsetting,” Steve agreed, wide-eyed and shivering, and started the car, and Billy *cackled*.

“It’s *upsetting*,” he tipped to laugh against Steve’s shoulder. “Axe in my head. Why do I gotta *upset*...things...everyone...all the time, Steve Harrington? You upset? You upset with me? Had to come out at—” he stared out the window like he’d never seen snow before, “—godfucking—forsaken o’clock, shit, your majesty. Sorry. Sorry I don’t give you a—any choice. Just—I just *force your hand*, right—” he laughed, clearing his throat, “You’ll have to teach me a *lesson* now —”

“Jesus,” Steve whispered again, staring ahead through the rapidly-fogging windshield. “Okay. Sweet—sweet potato?” Billy started snickering, hunching over to hide his snuffles. “Hey. Hey, Drunk Billy Hargrove.”

“Present,” Billy swung his legs toward Steve, flailing his arms around until his scabbed-up knuckles hit the glove compartment—he didn’t seem to notice—and his back was against the door. “Here. Yo.” He wiped his nose, trying to snort hard enough to clear his nostrils,

which sounded disgusting.

Steve shook his head. “You need to help me surprise sober Billy Hargrove, okay.”

“Bzzzt, that person does *not* exist,” Billy laughed, letting his head fall against the seat.

“He will tomorrow,” Steve saw Billy opening his mouth, and added, “—mostly. Mostly sober Billy Hargrove. We need to give him a present, okay? Help me—”

“Give me it now, and he’ll forget.” Billy flipped his hands palm up, and Steve grabbed the uninjured one and twined their fingers.

“I have to tell you I love you, remember? So you’ll believe it. And also—” Billy took a shaky breath, half a laugh, as Steve squeezed his fingers, “—also you have to tell me how to drive us home—I can’t drive stick—”

“What the hell—”

“I could read you poetry. We read some sonnets in—”

Billy snorted. “You gonna—’m I a California day? Not very temperate.”

“...what?” Over the next few minutes of Extremely Scientific Investigation, Steve managed to determine that any mention of *normal* dating activities made Billy mutter about Nancy, that Billy kinda wanted a crimping iron and a huge pet goat to ride into Judas Priest concerts, and Drunk Billy was useless at romantic advice. Steve patted his hand. “You said you’d teach me to drive stick, remember?”

“Shit,” Billy whispered. “Fuck. You sure we can’t sleep at—” He cocked his head the other way, rubbing his bobble hat across the window, and hummed, “—back in there?”

“Pretty sure,” Steve grimaced, “—I think Tommy wants to fight me, he’s been—”

“He tried to fuck me with Carol’s cherry vodka,” Billy snickered, and Steve’s mouth fell open, wondering if you *survived* being filled up with vodka.

“Jesus. Are you okay, seriously?”

“Told him you like me better now.” Billy grinned over, and Steve drug his hand down his face.

“God. Tell me how to drive your car, asshole.”

“There’s a gas pedal,” Billy started giggling again, and Steve leaned forward to groan against the steering wheel, “—there’s—there’s brakes—”

“Yeah, you—goddamn—trespasser,” Steve moaned against the weird plastic finish. “I got that, when do I use the clutch?”

Billy lifted their joined hands, then dropped them, thinking. “O-Okay. Engine’s got—it’s got four...zooms.”

“Speeds?” Steve laughed, eyeballing the gearshift.

“No. Yeah?” Billy ran his thumb up his forearm, where Steve had written that his mom loved him. “It’s...”

“Zooms, okay,” Steve squeezed his hand again. “Like Max?”

“Max,” Billy narrowed his eyes. “Max...es. One is big strong Max. Two’s...two smaller Maxes. Three...”

“More and more Maxes, okay.” Steve nodded, wondering whether he should just piggyback Billy’s drunk ass home, and pick up the Camaro in the morning.

“Littler Maxes’re faster, but they aren’t strong,” Billy squinted at him, “—like. Like hummingbirds.”

Steve nodded slowly. “So like, up a hill, we need less Maxes?”

“Start...one Max,” Billy nodded, “One big strong Max. One Max to rule them all.” Steve rolled his eyes, and put a foot gingerly on the

clutch. "Floor the clutch. S'switch."

"Right, okay," Steve pushed it in, and the gearshift slid smoothly into single-Max position. *Is she an ostrich, then*, he wondered, imagining one harnessed to the front of the vehicle, and trying not to giggle. He lifted his foot off the clutch, and the car made a horrible grinding noise, and died.

"Fuck's sake," Billy snickered. "*Clutch.*"

"Shit, I killed Max," Steve told him, and he laughed harder, finally scooting back around to face front, so he could hold Steve's hand on the gearshift.

"Clutch," Billy said. The gearshift was plastic, but still like grabbing something out of the freezer, and their breath fogged. Billy's fingers were warm where he'd had them in the pocket of his sweatshirt. "Start it again."

Steve did, making it nearly out of the parking space before he hit a ridge of snow, rolled backwards, and it died again. He pulled his hand away from Billy's, and started it again, then slid their fingers back together.

"Why d'you want me to...why should...thinking you love me? Sober me, y'know," Billy asked. "*Clutch.*"

Steve killed the engine again, startled, but then made it to the stop sign, sliding a tense few inches to the side as he braked on the ice. He drew a breath of relief. "I guess I—"

"He loves you too," Billy told the road ahead, "—clutch."

"What," Steve whispered, staring over, and Billy smacked his hand.

"Drive. *Clutch.*"

"Jesus. Really? I mean—" Steve lurched through the intersection, letting Billy shift him into Max Second after another muttered 'Clutch.' "You—he does? I mean—it's not just, like, compared to Tommy and Carol, and your dad—"

“Screw you, I know the difference,” Billy rubbed his face, swallowing, “—clutch.”

Steve made it through an entire intersection without the engine dying, and yanked his hand free to plonk it on top of Billy’s, squeezing it around the gearshift. “Christ. *Really?* I mean, not—not that you—” he tried to take a deep, sobering breath, and his voice cracked, “—I just. *Why—*”

“The hell d’you mean *why*,” Billy growled at him, and jerked his hand free to squeeze *Steve’s*.

Steve fought back giggles, feeling carbonated, like little shimmery bubbles were rising from his toes and filling his brain with more air than usual. “We should go on a date,” he told Drunk Billy, who snorted. The car died, and he restarted it, juddering forward to kill the engine in the middle of the intersection. His frantic stab at the clutch let it coast to a slow spinning stop over a patch of ice on the other side, and Billy stared over.

“Fucking *christ*, are you drunk too?!”

Steve leaned to kiss Billy’s hand on his, on the gearshift, and lean his cheek on it, closing his eyes. Billy just muttered a stream of nonsensical profanity, tucking his legs up, and leaving his hand where it was.

After a long moment of just grinning at the dashboard, his body curled around Billy’s hand, Steve pulled the Sharpie back out of his pocket. “Gimme your other arm.”

Billy eyed him, but held it out, and Steve started drawing a series of hearts from Billy’s wrist up to his elbow. Billy leaned against him, squirming. “Tickles like hell, *Harrington—*” He kicked out, laughing, and Steve finished off with a big heart with H + H in the center, and smacked a wet kiss on Billy’s cheek.

“D’you believe me?” he asked, and Billy laughed, lowering his head. “Hargrove,” Steve growled, flicking his earring aside to nuzzle his neck. Billy let his head loll aside, grinning, and Steve kissed up across the hickies Tommy or Carol had left, blowing across the damp

skin he left to feel Billy shiver and curl into him. “Honey-Hargrove. Sir Honey Mustard. Prickface. Sugar beet. Noodle pie—”

They both shook with Billy’s cackles. “You—your petnames. Holy shit. They’re *terrible*, they *suck*—”

“You call *me* stupid shit—”

“Not *that* stupid—”

“Love you.”

“Sure, yeah,” Billy snorted, trying to catch Steve’s mouth and kiss him back, and Steve angled to kiss the corner of his mouth, and pulled away, running his thumb up and down the marks on Billy’s neck. He wondered whether they were from a mouth, or somebody’s fingers.

“What do I say?” Steve restarted the car, then caught Billy’s fingers, interlocking them with his. “Hey.”

“Listening,” Billy squirmed around to face him, face reddening in the light from the streetlights, “—go ahead.”

“I *did*,” Steve groaned. “I said *so much* dumb shit, you don’t—you never *believe* me. What the hell do I need to do, propose?”

Billy’s mouth fell open, and he squeezed Steve’s fingers so hard they stopped hurting after a couple seconds, and went numb. “—I—I’m—I’m *leaving*, you—you *asshole*. You—you want me *gone*, you don’t—”

“Doesn’t matter—” It did, obviously, but Steve swallowed that thought down. “I mean, I don’t, I don’t want you to leave, shit.” He took a deep breath, squeezing Billy’s fingers back, and beginning to smell carbon monoxide from sitting in the car in the still air. “Tell me what to tell you, dickbag.”

“What—what the—you—” Billy started laughing hoarsely against their hands. Steve ground the gears, and Billy yelled “Clutch! Fucking christ—”

By the time they got back, it was nearly four am. Steve peeled his drunken parcel out of the bobble hat and scarf, and sat him up against the kitchen cupboards while he turned up the thermostat. They worked out a system—Billy would drink five more swallows of water for every kiss Steve pressed to his fingers. By the third glass, Steve was laughing and kissing his ears, or elbows, and Billy was trying to drink though a wide grin, pointing next to his jaw. Steve leaned in to kiss the soft skin under it, feeling it warm. He hugged Billy's head to his chest, taking a deep breath.

"Christ, gonna explode in—in piss," Billy mumbled against him, and Steve snorted.

"Go pee, babe." Steve got an arm around him and levered him upright, and they tottered to the bathroom.

"Zit morning?" Billy frowned around. "Breakfast?"

"Not for a couple hours." Steve tried to retreat to get a sweatshirt, and heard a loud thud, and a scrabbling at the bathroom door.

Billy yelled after him, "Dinner? You eat dinner? Harrington! Hey idiot, answer!"

Steve stopped to lean against the wall of the entryway, laughing so hard he had to wipe his eyes. "...you hungry, sweetie?"

"Whaddaya want for dinner," Billy muttered, and the toilet flushed.

"You should probably sleep it off, Trespasser William." Steve went back in to steady him while he struggled with his jeans.

"Did King Steve eat?" Billy squinted at him, teetered, and fell against his chest. He still smelled good, somehow.

Steve rolled his eyes, scooped up his blitzed boyfriend, and Billy's jeans slid off, catching on his foot. He cackled, kicking them off, and Steve got a handful of naked butt trying to keep him from flailing away.

"Hold it—hold on—hold on—*Hargrove*—" he yelped, trying to keep all six feet of bulky basketball player in his arms, pressed to his

chest. Billy 'helped' by pressing sloppy kisses to Steve's neck and shoulder, and trying to hug Steve's head. "Fuckhead—Hargrove—I'm gonna *drop* you—"

"You won't," Billy mumbled, yanking at Steve's shirt to press a raspberry against his neck.

"I will," Steve assured him. "There's a mattress, and pillows, so it wouldn't hurt."

"Mmm..." Billy pulled his arm from around Steve's neck, and let it flail, and Steve shuffled to compensate for the shift in balance. "...nah. Won't lemme fall."

Steve smacked a couple loud kisses on the parts of Billy he could reach. "Not *here*," he rolled his eyes, staggering out to the fort to crouch and roll him onto the pile of bedding, "—onto the *wood floor*, *jesus*, you're banged up already, don't kill my house, you already killed my door—"

"...kill you," Billy muttered, curling up in the pillow nest.

"I'm gonna get some food, okay? You stay here."

Billy nodded, squirming against the blanket. "Eat—eat a damn orange, majesty. King."

Steve leaned to kiss his naked knee, and Billy let his legs fall open, grabbing Steve's shirt and pulling him in.

"Wanna fuck?" he mumbled.

"You're half asleep," Steve pointed out, after the first dry-mouthed moment where he thought of how ridiculous and soft Billy looked, his dick poking under the edge of his borrowed sweatshirt, with bare legs, and little pompom socks.

"Mmm," Billy grinned up, sending a *zing* down Steve's dick, and he bit his lips.

"You're pretty drunk." He smoothed his hands up Billy's calves, feeling the goosebumps, and pulled some blanket over them.

“Drunk as shiiiiit.” Already forgetting his worry over Steve’s meals, Billy grabbed his sleeve and pulled him in, so Steve settled next to him, on his side, with his Neighborhood Menace curled up against his chest. He stroked Billy’s hair, accepting the sleepy nuzzled kisses at his ear and neck, and ran his fingers up and down Billy’s sweatshirted shoulder, and then, under the blanket, his chest. Billy squirmed against him, and Steve’s hand slid under the sweatshirt, up his naked side, as Billy curled closer—which was all weird, Steve thought, because he’d *had* his hands on Billy, all over him, he’d had his hand on Billy’s prick, and felt him come, but sliding his palm up over Billy’s ribs, and then his knuckles down Billy’s stomach felt *different*, with Billy half-asleep, occasionally humming to himself like a purring cat. Steve slid his hand lower—not to Billy’s dick, which he was pretty sure was as drunk as the rest of him, but down his hip and thigh, smoothing his hand over warm skin. Billy mumbled something, and tossed his leg over Steve’s side, and Steve suppressed snickers, feeling like he’d met a bald koala. He slid his hands up Billy’s sides again, memorizing the feeling, and unzipped the sweatshirt Billy’d stolen, so he could run the back of his fingers up the soft, curled-up skin of Billy’s stomach, and across his pectorals, and collarbones.

By that point he half wanted to jack himself off, and half wanted to cry, so he rolled on to his back, swallowed a few times, and stared for long minutes up at the Christmas lights. They behaved themselves as long as he had his eyes open, but as soon as he let them shut, the air in his nose got colder, because the glass in the door outside was broken, because Neil had *been there*.

He opened his eyes with a gasp, blinking away the image of Neil using Billy’s corpse to distract the demodogs. Billy was warm and mumbly against him, curling closer when Steve gave him a squeeze. He reached out a hand to feel the cushions around the side of the fort—nothing like the tunnels, or the bus—or what he’d seen of Billy’s room, where his father probably hit him. *Is that why his room was around the back?* Steve wondered, *so he could hit him out of sight of the road? Did he ever try to get away? Probably not*, he stared up, the lights going star-pointed as his eyes watered, trying not to blink. *Max said Billy just...took it. If Mr. Hargrove hit him too hard, I’d never even have known. He’d have said they fought. He’d have said it was an*

accident—Steve grabbed a trailing end of the Christmas lights, squeezing the plug until it bit into his hand, and took a shuddery breath against Billy's curls. Billy Hargrove didn't work as well, anymore, as a reminder that Hawkins was safe.

Steve jerked awake a few more times, throwing a hand out to touch the chintz sheet wall of the fort, banishing the tunnels from his brain, and then a car pulled up outside. Its headlights flashed across the walls, and he was disentangled from Billy and in the doorway with his bat before it had finished turning around and pulled away.

Steve leaned against the door frame for a long moment, rubbing his face, before tugging his coat and gloves on, and going out to circle the house at a slow jog. He finally grabbed a branch at about the height of his face and yanked himself up to sit against the trunk, watching his house. From the side could see the front porch, and the stairs to the back, and when his arms started to go numb, he tossed the bat back and forth between his hands.

By the time Billy staggered out, swathed in the flowered comforter off his bed, and followed Steve's footprints to circle the house, it was getting light. Steve's lungs clenched in the frosty air when he went to yell, so he kicked his legs, hoping they'd take his weight, and jumped down. Billy tromped over. Steve braced himself against the tree, and Billy stomped the last few steps to steady him.

"Did you fucking spend the night in a tree," Billy asked flatly, scooping up a handful of snow, and pressing it to his head with a grunt of relief. He had circles under his eyes, and still sounded a little slurry.

"I guess." Steve shrugged, crouching to try and rub some feeling back in his legs, "—I mean, not really, I didn't pick you up until three, uh, what time is it? I mean, it's not—it—it hasn't been that long."

"You spent the night in a goddamn—you—" Billy rubbed his face, wincing. "You—*shitbird*. Moron. *Asshole*. Did you—" He punched Steve's shoulder. "What is *this shit*?" Billy shoved his forearms in

Steve's face—not the sides with the Sharpie, his outer arms, with bruises, and Steve tripped stepping backwards, and nearly fell. “Did...did you *fuck* me while I was so goddamn drunk I wouldn't remember?”

“No! No. I didn't—”

Billy punched his shoulder again, then threw an arm around Steve's neck, pulling him under the blanket. He was damp, and warm, like he'd showered. “I'm all bruised to hell. What finally did it?”

“What?” Steve slid an arm around Billy's waist, pulling him close as they walked, and Billy laughed.

“What the hell—you beat me up before you screwed my ass, or during? D'I say something wrong? Wait 'til you got off to—”

“Jesus, no, no, look at my hands, look at my knuckles—” Steve stopped, pulling his arm from around Billy to yank his ski gloves off. “I didn't—I—I think you had some wild monkey sex with Tommy and Carol, you were talking about banana flavored condoms—”

“...shit, you're right,” Billy grabbed both of Steve's hands, turning them in his own, and Steve grabbed at the comforter as it fell in the snow. “I do...kinda remember that. Shit. It's all—” he waved his hand, “—hazy. He made monkey noises, christ. Is that all that happened? Who the hell was *punching* me?” Billy dragged the elastic of his shorts halfway down his hip, and Steve covered a snort, then stopped to frown at what looked like fingermarks.

“Tommy or Carol, I guess.” Steve made a face, and Billy shivered, in his shorts, in the snow. “And you fell on the gearshift. Shit. And you're freezing, I'm sor—”

“Don't be sorry, dipshit, you didn't do it.” Billy rolled his eyes. “How come it's fine for *you* to sit out here and freeze?”

“I'm in skiwear,” Steve snorted, wrapping the comforter around them again. “And I walked around every time I got numb—” He staggered, flailing an arm, as his left leg started to wake up, and Billy leaned down to grab him around the waist and hoist him over one shoulder

like a fireman, comforter and all. Steve squawked, kicking, and Billy smacked his ass, walking back towards the house.

“The *hell* is wrong with you,” Billy muttered.

Steve’s face was flaming, all the blood that had congealed in his veins over the hours outside heating to a boil as his heart *pounded* over the arm holding him on Billy’s shoulder, and the warm hand on his thigh, just under his ass cheek. He tried to prop himself up, flailing a foot and digging his elbow into Billy’s back, and Billy smacked his butt again.

“I will fucking *drop* you, shithead.”

Steve laughed, covering his face, and feeling the heat like burning in his gloveless fingers. “No, you won’t,” he snickered, and Billy tripped, nearly tipping them over. “Plant your *feet*, Hargrove,” Steve laughed aloud, and Billy growled, smacking him *again*, so Steve felt the heat rising against the chill air on his jeans. He slid his numb hands down the back of Billy’s jeans, and Billy yelled “Fuck” even louder than he had in the grocery store.

Billy thumped him back on his feet just inside the door, tossing the comforter on the floor, and yanking the velcro open on Steve’s ski jacket to get to the zipper.

“Shower,” Billy muttered, tossing Steve’s hat after his gloves, and kneeling to try and untie his boots with his banged-up hand, but Steve yanked him back up for a toothpaste-flavored kiss, and Billy laughed into his mouth. Steve let go of Billy’s sweatshirt, running his thumb under Billy’s jaw to tip his head for a better angle, and sinking his fingers into soft curls. He slid his other hand under the elastic of Billy’s shorts, over where he’d seen the fingermarks, and squeezed. Billy pressed him back against the wall, rocking their hips together, and swallowing a moan. “Ha-Harrington,” he panted. “Shower, you’re freezing. You’re like ice—”

Steve pulled him into a deeper kiss, trying to see around him to the clock, wondering whether there was time to tip him back into the fort, and leave his own kiss marks on every part of Billy’s body. Billy turned his face away, laughing. “What the hell. Come on, you can

fuck me in the shower.”

It was a long cold walk up the stairs, as Steve finally started to shiver until his teeth chattered, and Billy stayed just out of reach. “Don’t go too hard, I’m sore from last night—” he said over his shoulder, yanking the shower knob around to HOT, and Steve swallowed, surveying the bruises and scratches with a less-horny gaze as Billy leaned into the shower stall. He waited until Billy turned back, already half-hard in his shorts, and reached out to hook two fingers in the waistband, pulling them down further to expose fingermarks on both Billy’s hips. Billy dropped his hands to cover them—the bruises, not his half-hard dick—but Steve crouched, pulling him close to kiss along the finger marks.

“Christ,” Billy whispered, his dick hardening so fast he staggered. “Get—get in the shower. Your balls are gonna freeze off, man, come on.” He grabbed Steve’s hands and pulled him up, backing through the shower door.

Once under the spray, Steve got a handful of conditioner. Billy turned to face the wall and brace himself, but Steve turned him around and wrapped his hand around both their cocks, shielding them from the water with his other arm braced against the wall. Billy relaxed into his kisses, and Steve echoed his grin, stroking his cupped hand up and down both their dicks kinda haphazardly, between shivering, and kissing every single mark on Billy’s neck. He grabbed a scribbled-on, bruised up forearm, and kissed those marks too, and then Billy made a weird noise in his throat and threw both arms around Steve’s neck and yanked him close, shaking as hard as Steve was. The water started to pool around their feet, burningly hot against Steve’s numb toes.

Steve slid his free hand down Billy’s back, grabbing his ass and pulling them so tight together his other hand on their dicks could barely move. Billy groaned in his ear, grabbing a handful of Steve’s hair, and Steve mouthed at his neck and the side of his face, trying to press the awareness of Billy Hargrove, laughing and intact, through his senses into his brain.

“Say you’re okay,” he finally asked, tucking Billy’s hair back to bite gently at the shell of his ear.

“...’m fine,” Billy panted. His blunt nails scraped Steve’s back.

“Tell me,” Steve asked, leaning in for another deep kiss. He licked the last of the toothpaste flavor out of Billy’s mouth, letting his eyes flicker shut at the feeling of Billy laughing against his chest, and grinning against his mouth.

“—good, ’s good—” Billy whispered against his mouth, his knees starting to sag, and Steve steadied them against the wall as Billy shuddered against him, moaning and clenching his fingers in Steve’s hair. Steve muttered a lot of crap, clenching his eyes so tight his vision went rainbowy. He breathed against Billy’s neck, grabbing him closer. The shower pounded down, hot around them, but Steve still shook, forcing his lungs to expand and contract as they jerked and shuddered.

“T-talk to me, Hargrove,” he asked, burying his face against the wet skin of Billy’s neck. “You—you’re—fine, you’re—” he swallowed down what was probably his imagination, but felt like both of his lungs and maybe his stomach, trying to force their way up his esophagus. It was hard to talk, shaking so hard, and he remembered suddenly that *his* fingers were the ones clenched around Billy’s ass, and digging into his side, and he tried to stagger back.

“Jesus, your record’s fine, you didn’t lose anybody.” Billy pulled him back with an arm around his waist, and Steve imagined breaking that record—Dustin’s screams having *cut off* in the tunnels, or Lucas and Max left in the bus to die alone, because Steve (The Idiot) Harrington had walked out and gotten surrounded and *eaten*, or finding Billy dead in a pile of his own vomited vodka. Finding him in a pool of blood and cooking sherry, as his dad drove away.

“Hey, I’m okay,” Billy was whispering, when Steve’s brain flickered back on, disoriented like a VCR after a power outage.

Twelve, twelve, twelve, Steve thought, shaking his head to clear it.

“I’m fine—I’m okay, christ. What the hell, Harrington, I’m here, I’m all right—”

Steve held him tighter, waving his jizz-covered hand in the shower

spray before sliding it around Billy's shoulders. "You *sure* you're all right?" he asked, hearing his voice crack, and Billy took a deep breath, hugging him back just as tight, and running his fingers through Steve's hair.

"Shit, yeah, I'm hungover as hell, but christ. I'm just—I'm a little banged up, but it's not on you. Calm the fuck down, I just left for a night—"

"Thought your dad took you," Steve took a slow breath, and his lungs hitched. "Thought he *took* you, and I wasn't here, you *fucking asshole*, I told you to wait for me and I wasn't *here*, there was—there was *blood on the goddamn door*, Hargrove, I thought—"

"Shit." Billy's arms tightened until Steve felt like his bones should break, but the pain felt good. "I left a note—"

"I know—" Steve tried to control his breathing, then just pressed his face to the side of Billy's neck again, trying to muffle it. "I—I found it, shit. S-sorry. Sorry. You—you left a note, you're right, I'm—I just —"

"Ssshhh." Billy kissed the side of his head, his fingers nervous and fidgety on Steve's shoulders, and then his arms, and then around him again. "I'm—I'm okay, Harrington." He laughed, a little high pitched and shaky. "I'm fine. Sorry. I didn't mean to freak you out. Christ."

"Sorry I'm losing my shit," Steve mumbled into his neck, feeling his heart slowly stop thudding, under the hot shower, with Billy squeezing him until his bones creaked.

"It's okay," Billy breathed back.

Once Steve finally pulled himself away from under the hot water—his usually-reliable tear ducts seemed to be over their mutiny, for the moment—Billy sat on the toilet, pressing his fingers against the bruise on his face from where the bottle had slipped out of his numb hand. "Wonder what the hell I did that got me this one," he grinned up at Steve, and Steve leaned in to push Billy's hand away, and kiss the bruise.

“That was *you*, you fucking. Sugar beet.” He set his jaw, and Billy snorted, leaning in for a kiss. Steve relaxed, crouched naked in the warm bathroom, and let his eyes close, opening his mouth for Billy’s tongue.

“Pissing people off?” Billy asked, against his lips, and Steve shook his head, pulling his head back to run his thumb over the mark.

“You were lying on your back swinging a bottle around, and you dropped it.” Billy burst out laughing, leaning into Steve, and Steve turned to inspect the hand that had broken his door. It was swollen, and Billy winced as Steve gently moved the fingers, asking, “You want me to help you make up your face, Knight Hargrove?”

“What.” Billy stared at him, sounding hoarse, and Steve considered.

“Oh. And. I’m supposed to tell you you’re King Harrington’s favorite knight, and that sweatshirt is my favor—”

“Holy shit,” Billy breathed, his cheeks going pink in the way that meant he’d either try to climb on Steve’s dick, flee, or throw down, so Steve talked faster.

“—and if you want that covered up, your hand’s a mess, you’ll have to talk me through it.”

“What?! Hell no, I’ll look like John Wayne Gacy as Patches the Clown,” Billy snickered, wide-eyed.

“I’m good with my hands,” Steve grinned up, “—I think I can take a crack at it.”

“Really?!” Billy leaned his face in his good hand, laughing, and Steve dropped to sit crosslegged, trying to catch his eye.

“You’ve got a bruise on your cheek, and some down your neck,” he pointed out, and Billy put his hand around his own neck, pressing at them, before Steve pulled it away. “Don’t do that. Sorry, I already darkened ‘em up. Sorry. Can I help?”

“Yeah, I—I guess,” Billy glanced up at Steve’s face, then down again, at the marker on his forearms, “—if you want to. Should be

hilarious.”

“Sounds fun.” Steve shrugged. “If I do a shitty job, you can always wash it off.” Billy was just sitting, tracing the letters on his arms, so Steve leaned up to kiss his cheek, before trotting off to pull on jeans and a sweatshirt, and root around for Billy’s bag.

To smooth the foundation over the throat bruises, Steve cupped his hand under Billy’s jaw, sliding his thumb in to lift Billy’s head, and Billy jerked backwards, swallowing. “Watch it, *jesus*,” he growled, and Steve slowed, tentative with the little sponge. “...you fucking grab my throat and I’ll tear your *goddamn* hand off,” Billy hissed, and Steve nodded.

“Somebody grabs your throat, I’ll hold ‘em down for you,” he muttered, distracted by the effort of matching skin tone.

Billy laughed, his fingers clenching the letters on his forearms as he tried to hold still. “You—you would, wouldn’t you.”

Steve nodded, cocking his head to inspect his handiwork.

“What the hell. I’ll—I’ll help with your—gremlins. If they need...something.”

“What?” Steve frowned up, makeup sponge poised, and Billy snorted, grinning.

“I’ll help your kids. It’s—I can help you do your—your *stupid dangerous* ‘superhero of goddamn Hawkins, Indiana’ gig. I know I’m not here long, but if they need help and you can’t—*mmph*.”

Steve was careful not to smudge his bruise-covering efforts, kissing Billy—he dropped the sponge in the sink, and sank his fingers into the curls at the base of Billy’s head, pulling him close. “Holy *shit* I love you.”

Billy smirked. “I *am* even hotter than lasagna.”

“What? No, no, I—I meant—”

"You're good at this," Billy snorted, eyeing himself in the glass door of the shower. "I'll call you up the next hundred times I get fucked on some floor, drunk off my ass. You can buy a makeup kit and swing by my apartment. Peel the condoms off my face."

The clench in Steve's stomach and the taste of bile in the back of his throat were familiar to him, from the day he'd fought Jonathan Byers—who had been looking for a *missing child*—and Steve had spraypainted awful things about the smartest, most beautiful girl he knew, thinking she didn't want him. *She sure didn't after that*, he thought numbly, staring vaguely between Billy's neck and the makeup sponge, then clenching his jaw, and pressing the pigment over the bruises Billy had from someone else's mouth on his neck. "Why the hell you having sex with a hundred other people?" He cleared his throat. "I just mean—"

"Sometimes you aren't there." Billy shrugged, combing his fingers through his curls to hold them out of the way of Steve's little makeup sponge.

"What am I, then, an appliance?" Steve tried to laugh, swallowing, and busied himself dabbing the wet sponge at the bottle. "Like a washing machine."

"You've got a great agitator," Billy snickered, sliding his foot along Steve's jeans, and over his dick. It leaped to attention like the traitor it was, and Steve huffed a laugh, his lungs feeling heavy.

"Sometimes you want the laundromat anyway?" he asked, and Billy leaned in to kiss him again, laughing against his mouth.

Steve did a pretty good job on the makeup, he thought, even though he didn't know how to do the fancy stuff. He figured he'd probably put Billy's eye out, trying the mascara, but the only difficulty with smoothing the watered foundation on to Billy's warm skin was his dick twitching against his leg as he imagined messing it up afterwards—dabbing it off the circles under Billy's eyes with a warm cloth, as Billy sat patiently, eyes closed. Afterwards, in the bedroom, Steve'd peel him out of his school clothes, and kiss the last traces off

his neck.

“...you’ll just wear long sleeves, right,” Steve asked, and frowned at Billy’s fingers, clenching white-knuckled against his forearms over Steve’s letters. “—you’re gonna give yourself more bruises, man, come on.”

“What is all this shit. Why were you writing on me?”

Steve stared at the letters visible around Billy’s clenched nails, and pointed to the safest option, *Hopper knows*. “Uh. El told Hopper. I—I think he knows that—I—um. I think he knows it’s *you*, shit.” He grimaced up. “That I’m gay for.”

“...well, yeah,” Billy snorted, grinning. “What did you think, she’d tell him you were in a threesome with your ex and her new squeeze?”

Steve stared at him, heart pounding. “No, I mean, he *knows it’s you*.”

“...who the hell did you think it’d be? Anybody you told you were giving it up the ass to a dude was gonna know it was me.”

“...but it was just *me*, I was gonna protect Will—I didn’t mean to—”

“And when you say you’re into *dick* now,” Billy raised his eyebrows, mouth quirked, “—nobody’s gonna notice me? Staying in your house?”

“But—but you’re just here because of your *dad*.” Steve squinted back, watching Billy’s jaw flex.

“Right. Just because you’re afraid my—you think he’ll—”

Steve stood, stepping back. “Check your face, we gotta leave soon.”

He focused on *driving*, getting to school, mostly letting Billy’s conversational starters lay where they fell, and then hauled him out and to the nurse’s office. She clucked about Billy’s fingers, and Steve saw him setting his jaw to be *Billy*, so he told her the victim had been a dumpster, and left them to it.

Steve dropped into the chair to face Nancy, ostensibly to study, but actually to bury his face in his backpack, and make an anxious noise deep in his throat at the friend closest to “intelligent adult”.

“Everything’s terrible,” he told his textbooks, through his bag, and she narrowed her eyes at the grid she was neatly lettering.

“Oh, here we go, just a minute, almost done—” she held up her pencil, squinting at the page, and then stabbed it down to squiggle in one last square. “Right. Done. I think. What *now*?”

“He’s—”

“Who’s?” said Billy’s voice, over his shoulder, as he pulled out a chair and dropped into it next to Steve. Steve wrapped his arms around his head, wishing he could crawl under the table, listening to Billy’s amused “Good morning, Wheeler,” and Nancy’s startled ‘Hello.’

It didn’t seem likely that a Looney-Tunes hole would open and swallow Steve up, but he wished hard for it for a long second—then took a deep breath, pushing everything back down, and raised his head. Billy’s leg was warm against his. Nancy’s eyebrows were nearly in her hairline. She clicked at her automatic pencil, pushed the lead back in, and clicked it back out, as Billy dug around in his bag before pushing a sandwich baggie of apple slices over to Steve.

Steve eyed the apples, feeling the *everything* he’d shoved down start to come back up, and, to his horror, a burning in his eyes.

“So you don’t get scurvy,” Billy pushed the apple pieces closer, “—since you didn’t have breakfast, and you forgot to grab lunch—”

“Thanks,” Steve grabbed them, and his backpack, and shoved away from the table, stalking as fast as he could to the library door, and passing the closest restrooms. He was fine, if he kept moving—he tried to think of the least likely place he’d be found, rounding a turn in the hallway as he heard the library doors open in a scuffle of squeaking shoes. *Billy’s shoes are wet against the linoleum, because he left these apples in the car*, he realized. *He went out in the snow to get*

me apples. They were cold in his hand as he spotted the teacher he owed an essay on *The Grapes of Wrath* through the mesh security glass of her classroom door. He knocked, taking a deep breath and resetting his face as she poked her head out.

“Could you let me study in one of the dressing rooms?” he asked, keeping his smile casual. “I’ve got lunch and a free period, and my friends are really great, but—” he winced, grinning, and she laughed.

“I guess I can trust you not to mess up the costumes.” He followed her to the next doorway down, and she unlocked it, then shook the keys at him. “But if I find all the dresses ripped, I’ll know who was trying them on!”

Steve realized that was funny a second later, and laughed. “Thank you! Finally, time to get that essay done.”

She slapped his shoulder, his eyes stung again, and he swallowed it back. She pressed her lips together. “You look like you could use some quiet.”

He kept the grin on as she locked the door after him, then sank down against the wall behind the table, where he and his sneakers wouldn’t be visible through the security glass panel in the door. The *everything* he’d been pushing down swelled up and squeezed tears out of his eyes, and he took a deep breath, closing them, and let his head thump back against the wall.

Squeaky shoes ran by, and the bell rang as his lungs jerked. He pressed his fists against his mouth, feeling them judder through a few shaky, wet breaths before settling into a kind of accordion action he tried to muffle in his arms. Once they’d stopped—he felt the sharp pains in his sides he usually had after too fast a run—he slumped against the table, wiping his eyes on his sleeves, and wrinkling his nose in disgust as he squeezed it and wiped his fingers on his jeans. Instead of getting up and checking the time, he ate his apples. They weren’t as cold, and they’d gone a little brown, and looking at them still made his sinuses burn, picturing Billy in California, chopping apples.

They were sweet.

Rounding the corner past the cafeteria on the way to physics, Steve found himself mashed against the drinking fountain, Billy's bandaged fist in his jacket, his breath minty. "Behind the gym, *Harrington*. Five minutes."

Tommy whistled, and Billy shoulder-checked him on the way by.

Billy was waiting past the dumpsters, hidden in the cement-walled dead end between the gym, band, and the back of the auditorium. He shoved Steve against the wall as he came around the corner, leaning in to grab the collar of his shirt, his bandaged arm braced against the wall over Steve's head. The caked-on foundation was holding the line against the darkness under Billy's eyes, but without his steady hand on the mascara and whatever else, he looked weirdly pale, and he smelled like he was sweating alcohol. "So you *can* hear the shit coming out of my mouth. *Harrington*. The *fuck* did I do."

"No," Steve held his hands up between them, and forced himself to smile *at* Billy, and not just make an excuse about class to cover his escape. "No, you didn't—"

"You want me gone? Give me three strikes, Little League champ."

"What?" Steve swallowed.

"Before I'm out. Give me another chance—"

"No—it's not—"

Billy let go of Steve's collar, and rubbed his eyes, swallowing. "At least you're talking to me. What did I...did I—did I kick your ass again? It's *something*—"

Steve drew a long breath, half wanting to kiss him, half wanting him to have already left for California, so Steve could be a mess without having to account for himself. "Not—no, damn it. We didn't—it wasn't a *fight*."

“So there was something. Perfect. Did I gross you out?” Billy grinned, reaching across to clench his fingers where Steve had written on his arm—again. *He has to be giving himself bruises*, Steve thought, reaching out to tug at Billy’s hand. Billy allowed it, watching where their fingers touched, then glanced back up at Steve. “Will’s not here, you don’t have to pretend you’re into me.”

“Not pretending, *jesus*.” Steve slid his fingers up the sleeve of Billy’s borrowed sweatshirt, stroking the soft skin of his inner wrist.

“What’d I do, cry some more? D’I beg for something? *Something* made you—you fucking—you looked *through* me all morning—”

“Not—not all morning,” Steve protested, watching Billy’s splinted fingers.

“Gonna knock you on your ass in gym,” Billy bared his teeth, “—climb on your cock—bite your fucking *jugular*—pretending I don’t exist,” his voice cracked, “—what is this shit, you—you wish I didn’t fucking exist? You want me to *not exist*, Harrington?”

“Hell no.” Steve squeezed his wrist, staring into Billy’s red, teary eyes. “No, Hargrove, I—of—”

“—because there aren’t a hell of a lot of wishes I can grant,” Billy laughed, swallowing hard, “—but that one I got, *your majesty*—”

Steve grabbed him around the shoulders and pulled him into a tight squeeze, rocking them together. “No, no, no. No. Hargrove. Trespasser.” Billy huffed a laugh, his tense muscles making it break and sound kind of like more than one note at the same time. “Jesus. Dickhead. You—you—you can just—just say my name, christ. Punch my shoulder. Get my *attention*, asswipe. Sweet—sweet. Pie. I’m just—I just tune out—”

“Get bad reception?” Billy laughed against the side of his head, shaking.

“I do, I get all knotted up in my head—” Steve let himself squeeze Billy against himself *nearly* as tightly as he wanted to, before leaning back against the wall to clear his throat, “—about—lots of shit, it’s

—”

“Screw you, it’s *different* today, you—”

Steve thought of a way to ask about that morning, without dropping his neediness on Billy’s head like a load from a dump truck. “You, uh, just—you told me you loved me. I just—” Billy went entirely stiff against him, before his lungs started bucking control in the way Steve recognized, and he grappled clumsily, trying to grab and hold as much Billy Hargrove as possible. “I—I said it back! Hargrove! I said it back, I *wrote it* on you—because you wouldn’t remember—you—you told me to write it—you wanted to give me shit about it later—”

“What, *this?!* ” Billy laughed disbelievingly, reaching up to shove his cuff back to his elbow.

“Yeah, yes, ‘Steve has—’”

“Steve has *FEEBLINGS*, ” Billy read, and Steve grabbed his arm to look.

“...feebings?” he read, starting to snicker himself, as his eyes stung. “Y—you were so drunk, sweet—sweetbread—”

“I was?! ”

“You *were*, dickhead, you *yanked your arm—*”

Billy snorted. “What feebings do you *have*, Steve Harrington?”

“Lots of feebings,” Steve cackled, leaning into Billy’s shoulder. “So many feebings, I’m—I’m just—you said you loved me, and then you didn’t remember, asshole, and it—it’s shitty, it was shitty—that’s it, that’s why I wasn’t—”

“...glad it went well, I guess,” Billy stared at his arm, glanced at Steve, and started laughing again, wiping his eyes. He made a show of licking his lips. “We should cut class, and—”

“I can’t,” said Steve, who couldn’t take more of this conversation, though he did lean in to give Billy a hard kiss, on his mouth, and the unbruised side of his jaw, and then his neck. He breathed against

Billy's skin for a moment, smelling cologne. "—sorry. Sorry." The bell rang, and he pushed Billy away hard enough he staggered back, and then went to class.

When Steve wandered out—well after the last bell, and after staring into his locker for long enough that a freshman, their face entirely glasses, asked him whether he was okay—Billy and his car were missing. Steve surveyed the parking lot, exhausted, and considering just taking a nap on the floor of the hall. Somebody cleared their throat behind him, and he stepped out of the way of the door, glancing back.

Max, bundled in a coat and mittens in uncharacteristic pink and grey, glared him up and down. "...wait, if he's not with you, and he's not with us—"

"Maybe he'll be back soon." Eleven put in, frowning around. Her coat and mittens matched Max's, but in pink and white, and Steve forgot his car-stealing home invader to grin at them.

"Did...did you guys buy matching outfits?"

"Yes!" said Eleven, at the same time Max said "No!"

"It's just a *warm coat*," Max hissed, her whole face reddening.

"They're nice." Steve fought a grin, for a moment wishing Billy were here to tease his stepsister, and then wondering whether that would ruin it.

"Max is teaching me to skateboard, and it's—" Eleven began, but Lucas' voice cut her off, coming abruptly from behind them.

"Erica says she'll '*return Billy when she's done.*'" His voice was grim. "Why's my little sister with *Billy*, Steve?"

Steve swiveled on one foot to face him, and Max ran up to Lucas, jaw set. He had his walkie-talkie in hand.

"What?! Is—what—" Steve sputtered. "Your *little sister's* with *Billy*?"

“Great, you don’t know either! I—she seems fine?!” Lucas threw his hands in the air, and bit his lips, frowning back at Steve. “She’s *alive*, or she *was*—”

Steve cleared his throat. “Uh.” *Why does Billy keep getting kidnapped by children?*, he wondered, taking a deep breath. “What’s going on? D’you know?”

“I don’t like him around her without El,” Max hissed at Steve, and he hesitated, pretty sure she was thinking about the same night he was, when Billy’d been so rattled and furious he’d threatened bodily harm to a child.

He took a deep breath. “—yeah. Yeah, do you know where they are, Sinclair?”

“No, they won’t—they aren’t *answering*—” Lucas took a deep breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I just know she and her friend Tomika stomped out at lunch, and told her friends they were coming over here—and then I couldn’t get either of them to—he gave the walkie-talkie to *her*, and before I could answer it, the teacher confiscated it until after class—”

“She left at *lunch*?” Max grabbed Lucas by the upper arms, then pulled back, patting at him awkwardly, while he stared into her face. “I just mean,” she swallowed, glancing at Steve, “—that’s hours ago.”

“Look,” Steve put in, cautiously. “I’m not saying we shouldn’t find him, but he’s been fine with Will, and Eleven—”

“Eleven has *superpowers!*” Lucas yelled, as Max shouted “You were *with them all weekend!*”

“I know, I’m—I just mean, don’t panic yet?” Steve tried, wincing, as Lucas tried the walkie-talkie again.

They all waited for an answer. After several minutes of Lucas’ increasingly intense “Hello? Anyone? *Over,*”s, and Max yelling, Erica’s voice came through.

“Shush up, guys,” she whispered. “You’re scaring it! Give us a minute!”

Lucas stared at the walkie-talkie, and after that, nobody could raise her. "...she must have clicked it off. She doesn't even *have* a walkie-talkie—this one's *mine*—"

"She must be using Billy's," Steve shrugged, then blinked back at the stares, "—what?"

"Why does *Billy* have one?" Max hissed, and Steve raised his hands defensively.

"Uh, Dustin. He, uh, he gave us a set. Why don't we go back inside," he suggested, and Max glared and grabbed his elbow, dragging him onward to the doors.

In the library, Max hauled Lucas over behind a bookshelf to whisper fiercely, and Eleven sat at a table, folding her hands. Without her having to look up, Steve felt the expectation that he'd sit down, and he succumbed to the pull.

"I told Hopper about liking waffles or spit," she said, as he dropped into a chair, and he choked on air, before smacking a hand over his mouth.

"What," he gasped.

"He said he *doesn't want to know*—"

"Oh my god, what did you say?!"

"And we'll *talk about it when you're older*—"

"Oh lord." Steve buried his face in his arms, wishing Billy would *answer his walkie-talkie*.

"He was trying to tell me what to do if I *bleed* from different places," she rolled her eyes, "—get a first aid box, *duh*. You get a first aid kit if you're bleeding from *any of the places*."

"Oh nooo, Hopper, I'm so sorry," Steve told the table.

"*He* said to go to the *nurse* even if I'm *embarrassed*, and I said I'll just stand up in class and say 'Help! I'm bleeding! It's everywhere!'

Blood!’ so she knows it’s *urgent*.”

It sounded like the librarian dropped something, but Steve was laughing too hard into his arms to look.

“The first aid book Jonathan had said you could use anything that would soak it up, as long as it wasn’t dirty. Like bread. I could ask if anyone’s lunch had bread. You have to wrap it in something, so you don’t get bread in the wound—” She cocked her head, considering, and Steve tried not to *die* imagining her trying to trim a PB&J into a maxi pad.

Hopper, Billy, I’m manning up, before Eleven does anything horrible with a breadstick, he told himself, and cleared his throat. “You—you should, uh, ask Nancy. Girls, uh, they—” he looked up to see Max and Lucas walking up, and swallowed, feeling his face heat like a stove burner. “—ask Nancy, okay, just talk to her. Or, um, or Joyce?”

Eleven narrowed her eyes at him, then turned her laser concentration on Max, and Steve smacked the table.

“Any word?!”

Max narrowed her eyes at him, but he thought if she knew the conversation he’d just spared her, she’d understand.

“None,” Lucas said, his voice steady, but he folded his arms and *stared* at Steve.

Probably, Steve thought, thinking of what he’d *do* to him, if Billy—he rubbed his face, sliding down in his chair with a groan. Billy’d seemed sober, earlier, not that that meant anything. Max started drumming her hands on her skateboard, and what Steve could see of Lucas’ arm shifted towards her. Max’s drumming ceased, and Steve again wished Billy was there, or that he was the kind of brother Steve could tell things, when something happened like Max holding hands with a boy under the table.

“Look, um, I—I did Billy a favor. He said he’d help out you little shits.”

“He *what?*” Max squinted, shaking her head like she was trying to clear an Etch-A-Sketch.

“Why ask *him?*” Lucas stared.

“Maybe she thinks he’s okay because of me,” Max laughed, leaning her face in her hands. “He’s my *brother*, right, he’s probably fine—she doesn’t—she wouldn’t know—I haven’t told what he’s—” She was clenching her fists in her hair, and Eleven was staring around the table with a worried frown, when the walkie-talkie came on in Billy’s voice.

“On our way back—*augh*, *jesus*, *careful*—”

“Put my *fucking* sister on,” Lucas said calmly, and when Erica’s voice came through, he dropped his head in his hand, drawing a shaky breath.

“We’re on our *way*, god. Oh—” she cracked up, as an explosion of profanity came through in *Billy’s* voice, and peals of laughter from another little girl voice. “We—we’re—oh my gosh, oh no—” It cut out on them both laughing harder, and Billy still muttering things he probably shouldn’t’ve, but Steve let himself relax, somewhat.

Lucas got up and ran outside, followed by Max, and Eleven shrugged, checking the clasp on her bag. “...Lucas...is afraid of Billy,” she told her bag, and Steve grimaced.

“Uh. Um, Max too,” he ran his fingers through his hair, then tried to fix it, “—he’s, uh, you know how you—if you—if you have to get out of a bad place, sometimes you just don’t—care anymore? How you get out? He’s, um, he’s kinda...”

She listened, watching his face. “...I wouldn’t hurt friends.”

“No, um, he didn’t—he shouldn’t have done that, he—he didn’t know he—” Steve sighed. “He’s trying to do better? He is, he’s doing better, he’s—he’s choosing to—to do better—” He thought of the King Kong threesome, and winced.

“That’s why you want me along,” she nodded, pursing her lips. “Is...is that why Max...” She bit her lips, clicking her bag open and

closed. “Is she just my friend because—”

“No! No,” Steve waved his hands, “—I don’t—Max—she’s pretty honest—if she didn’t like you, you’d know!”

She nodded, frowning, and swung her bag over her shoulder, tapping her foot. He drug himself up, and they wandered out of the school doors just as Billy parked. Two little girls piled out of the passenger seat, ran around, and started tugging at him, and Lucas tried to grab his sister. The other little girl elbowed her way in, and Billy smacked at her hands, and Steve saw blood.

His lungs shuddered, and he yanked the little stranger out of the way by the backpack, reaching out to Billy’s torn and bleeding hand—it was smearing blood all over the steering wheel—and the front of his bloodied pullover sweatshirt.

The pocket of Billy’s sweatshirt meowed.

“Holy shit.” Steve leaned his face in his arms on the roof of the car. “Jesus fuck. I thought you were *dying*.”

Billy scooted the seat back, froze, and yelled “*Damn* you, fucking *sabertooth monster*—” as the pocket of his sweatshirt writhed. “—demon beast—*christ*—”

Steve tried not to laugh, a little giddy with relief—Billy had his hands raised, blood dripping from the heel of his hand, and down his fingers. Steve cleared his throat. “D’you—um, do you need help—?”

The little girl that wasn’t Erica elbowed her way back in. “It’s okay, Marcenia! We’re almost there! Get *out*!” She grabbed Billy’s arm, yanking at him, and the cat yowled. Billy made it out, but stumbled back against the car again, muttering under his breath.

“What the fuck,” said Max, stalking over.

“She doesn’t *like* you,” said the other little girl.

“Eleven gets rides all the time, why can’t I?!” Erica joined the fray. “Tomika was going to look all *alone*—by the old *Shireman* house—”

“You were looking for that *cat*?! By the *Shireman* house?!” Lucas put in, “—couldn’t it have waited ‘til *after* school?! With *backup*?”

“It’s *cold* out there,” the other little girl, Tomika, apparently, hissed. “She’s *little*.”

Billy rubbed his face, and shot a glare at Steve, waving at Erica and her friend. “Are these two even *yours*?”

“Not mine,” Steve blinked back. “Uh, welcome to babysitting, I guess?”

Billy jabbed him with two fingers, and hissed, “*I want a divorce*.”

Steve started snickering, Lucas’ frown intensified, and Tomika tried to stick her face in Billy’s pocket, only to be met with a swipe from a tiny, fluffy, orange-and-brown splotched paw with blood on its claws and fur.

“Marcenia Lyle Alberga,” Tomika growled, holding her hand to her cheek, “—this is why you have *no friends*.”

“Can we—could I sort of—lift it over your head?” Steve waved at the roiling sweatshirt, and Billy winced, nodding.

“God, try. Please.”

“...why is she in *your* pocket?” Max asked, eyes narrowed, stepping in, and rolling up her sleeves.

“He got her out of the tree,” Erica announced, and Lucas snorted, but stepped in with Max to grab the bottom hem of the sweatshirt and lift it away from Billy’s stomach—at arm’s length—while Steve pulled Billy’s sleeves over his bloody hands and lifted the whole sweatshirt off, yanking him away from it as Tomika grabbed the yowling, thrashing bundle.

Eleven ran up. “I got a first aid kit,” she said, reaching towards Billy’s hand, then pulling back. “I can *practice* now.”

“The fuck are you practicing for,” Billy muttered as she drug him over to sit the aid kit on the trunk.

"I need to know what to do with a lot of blood," she said matter-of-factly, and Steve rubbed his face, before peeling out of his jacket to drop it over Billy's shirtless shoulders.

"*Why*," Billy pressed, frowning at her, and Steve left him to it, turning back to Max, Lucas, Erica, Tomika, and her kitten.

"I can't believe you *skipped school* to find that thing," Lucas groaned, "Mom's gonna kill *both* of us—"

Tomika's chin jerked up, Erica threw an arm between them, opening her mouth, and Steve interrupted.

"All right, every one of you little gremlins missed the bus, who needs rides home?" Steve yelled, frowning at his backseat, and then the child posse. Tomika narrowed her eyes, and blew a massive bubblegum bubble at him.

"Erica can sit on me," Lucas sighed.

"El can sit on me, I'm not getting close to Marcenia." Max crossed her arms, apparently familiar with Tomika's cat, and Tomika sniffed. When Billy wandered back over, his hands thickly bandaged, and gauze over his entire stomach like he'd been attacked by a demogorgon, Max glared up at him. "So you *do* know how to be a big brother," she hissed, punching his shoulder, and stomped around the other side of the car. He set his jaw.

"Sooo it's cold out here, everybody pile in," Steve rubbed his jacketless arms, nodding at his car. El was stuffing her first aid kit back in her bag, but Billy walked around and pawed at the passenger seat door with heavily bandaged flippers until Max roared with frustration from inside and got out to help him, slamming the door after her.

Lucas scrabbled at his hair, turned a truly vicious glare on Steve, and piled in, and Erica clambered after him, rolling her eyes. Max shoved Billy into the front seat with her foot, kinda looking like she wanted to laugh, or cry, and when Steve climbed in the driver's seat, Billy was biting his lips, his eyes flicking towards where El was trying to balance on Max's lap.

There was a mass crush away as Tomika climbed in with Marcenia, still wrapped in Billy's bloodied sweatshirt, and emitting a creepy arcing rusty-hinge-like noise, but Steve just reached over and squeezed Billy's knee, and backed out of the parking space.

"Where am I going." He glanced at Lucas' glower in the rearview mirror.

"The Sinclair's," Tomika leaned between the seats, and Marcenia yowled at the motion, "I can walk from there—"

"Hell no," Lucas shoved her back over, "—we're delivering that thing to your doorstep, so you can *lock it in*."

At Tomika's house, Erica piled out to help her extract her cat, and Lucas scooted over, letting El slide off Max's lap. They all stretched, groaning. Tomika's mom came out to clasp Billy's hand through the window. "I'm sorry," she said, wide-eyed, and showed him deep, scabbed-over scratches on her arm. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "This cat, it only like her. I call it *bakaneko*, a demon cat."

"Yeah, it is." Billy frowned over her shoulder at Tomika in the doorway, her tortoiseshell kitten on her shoulder, grooming the blood out of its claws. Erica waved, and he lifted a bandage mitten at her.

"She will not sleep without *Marucenia*," Tomika's mom huffed, and patted Billy's hand, grinning. "Thank you."

Max kicked the back of his seat, and he hunched his shoulders, nodding, as Tomika's mom trotted back into the house, stopping to kick at a patch of thick ice on the walk.

"Fucking *hell*, asshole," Max muttered. "Kittens out of *trees*."

"*That* wasn't a *kitten*," Billy shot back, and she was silent for a long second, before she started sniggering. Lucas didn't say anything as they dropped he and Max off—though he gave Billy's seat a kick—and once everyone else was gone, El settled in the middle of the back seat, leaning forward.

"No waffles." Billy glared over his shoulder, narrowing his eyes, and she dropped back against the seat with a sigh. "I'm not going

anywhere like this.”

“I did a good job, though,” she hugged her bag, “—with all the blood.”

“*What the shit*,” Billy squinted at Steve, then at her, “—what’s with the blood thing—”

“No, don’t—” Steve waved a hand, too late, as El restarted her description of Hopper’s aborted lecture, and dumped the explanation of the female reproductive system back in their laps. As they pulled up to Hopper’s trailer, Billy was gleefully relaying stories of his mom’s coworkers reactions to the White Pants Incident, and Steve had entirely too much information to ever look the woman squarely in the face.

“Ohhh,” Eleven rolled her eyes, “—*that’s* why I shouldn’t use a waffle. You could have just *said* so.”

“Wait, *what*,” Billy cackled.

When they got back to Steve’s house, Billy tried to talk to him again, and Steve grabbed his white-knuckled hand and yanked it off the letters on his arm again, busying himself with replacing most of Eleven’s piles of gauze with bandaids. “Okay. I—I wrote your mom loves you, because—because I called her, and she *does*, okay.”

“...what,” Billy stared back at him, “—what—Harrington, if—if you’re screwing with me, I’ll—”

“C’mon, shit,” Steve shoved Billy towards the fort, and grabbed the phone—when he took the base off the side table and scooted it along the floor, the curly cord juuuust stretched into the fort, and he dialed from memory. “Ma’am,” he said, and Billy scrambled to sit next to him, the phone pressed awkwardly between their ears.

“Is my *kid* listening?” she hissed. “You better have *both ears* pressed to this phone, boyo, ‘cause I need to yell into ‘em—”

Steve winced, trying to pull the phone away from Billy, but he jerked

it back, grinning.

“You listening, kid?”

Steve yanked at the phone, then registered Billy’s relaxed slump against his neck and shoulder, and waited.

“Yeah, mom.” Billy’s voice was hoarse, and it sounded like she lost hers for a second, clearing her throat with a growly whine in the back of her throat.

“Do—do you remember why you were born at eight months, Billy?”

“You fell?” he whispered, and Steve realized Billy was *laughing*—not in the furious way he had in the trunk, but relaxed, with tears running down his cheeks. Steve flapped a hand for the napkins they’d brought out with Will, and handed one over.

“I—I did not—no?!” she sputtered, and Steve couldn’t help snickering with Billy at how indignant she sounded. “I did not—carrying *valuables*—did not *fall*—I’m obviously *better* at making children than most people! You were done! You were *perfect*, and I stuck a fork in —”

“That image is *still gross*, a decade later—” Billy cackled, and she shouted over him.

“A *mommy fork*, and you were *perfect*, and I wanted to *meet* you. I couldn’t wait. You have *heard this story*.”

“Yeah.” Billy’s voice cracked.

“I wanted to show everybody *in the world* the *very best baby*, that’s why I put up with you showing up *at the beach*—I can’t believe you, there was water at the beach *already*, but *no*, I gotta dump my own—you know all the places I had *sand*—”

“You shouldn’t surf when you’re eight months pregnant,” Billy laughed, wiping his eyes, and Steve stroked his thumb up and down through the curls at the nape of Billy’s neck.

“You—I hadn’t—I hadn’t even *gotten near the water*, I was just—you

better admit you wanted to meet me too, *buster*—there I am yelling for everybody to *appreciate my baby*, be jealous of this *absolute gift* in front of their eyes—little *sand monster*—”

“Yeah, Mom.” Billy’s voice was gravelly, and Steve squeezed him, feeling his eyes burn, and his lungs ache. “...maybe I just wanted to surf.”

“Well *yeah* you did, you think my kid has *bad taste*? And then taking forever to learn to swim—” she snorted, and Billy choked out a laugh.

“I *didn’t*, come on. I’m just not a ff—a *sea turtle*—”

“You are definitely my little land turtle. Hey. Other kid!”

“Steve?” Billy laughed, grinning over, and Steve worked the muscles in his cheeks to smile back.

“Steve,” Steve confirmed, and she huffed.

“—I can hear he’s still a huge crybaby. I did that on purpose too.”

“Shut up, I forgot how *embarrassing* you are,” Billy muttered.

Steve fought down the same urge he felt watching Nancy’s mom coo over her little sister, or listening to Joyce’s fury through the phone over Will, or Hopper touching Eleven’s shoulder all the time, just to make sure she was still there—he wanted to fling bottles, or hit trees with his bat, or just call his parents over and over and scream as loud as he could down the line.

Billy’s mom didn’t wait for his reply, cackling, “—oh *yeah* I am, I’ve been *saving up* how embarrassing I can be—”

Billy huffed a laugh. “That’s scarier than—”

“He’s a *crybaby* so I know when to scoop him up, and carry him around—”

“I don’t think you’ll be doing a lot of that,” Billy put in, grabbing a napkin and blowing his nose.

She replied through gritted teeth. “*I absolutely will—*”

“He’s pretty tall,” Steve put in, and cleared his throat. “I could—”

“I will lift him *anyway*,” she growled, and Steve remembered he wasn’t actually necessary for this conversation, and shut up. “I bench 160, *kiddo—*”

“Whoa there,” Billy sniffled, “—don’t give yourself a—”

“How tall *are* you,” she wailed suddenly. “I don’t have any *pictures*, you didn’t *send* me anything, how am I supposed to humiliate you in front of your girlfriends without little chubby Billy in braces—”

“What?!” Steve snorted, and Billy elbowed him, pulling the phone (and Steve, attached) closer to his head to yell back at her.

“Where the hell was I supposed to send them, it’s not like you—”

“To the prison?” She sounded startled, and Billy went still. “I waited every visiting day for you, you ungrateful—”

“What,” Billy choked.

“I...I took you across state lines, kiddo. Don’t you remember?”

The plastic was starting to hurt Steve’s ear, wedged sideways so both he and Billy could listen, but he kept quiet.

“I—I remember g-getting pulled over,” Billy stumbled over his words, “—I, uh, I remember packing up the Camaro, I remember you hauling me out in footie pajamas—”

“I don’t—I won’t drink anymore,” she cut him off. “I haven’t, I—I went to this—it was so boring, I had to bring your pictures and laugh at them in the waiting room to remember why I was there—”

“You—you laughed at *my* pictures?! You look—looked like one of the *Beatles*, okay—”

“You be careful there, *son o’ mine*. An-anyway. Honey. I’m—I’m *better*, I—I’ve got a good job, I’m making payments on this place—I

don't know what to put in your *bedroom*, Turtle, I have—I haven't —"

She'd started crying as hard as Billy, and Steve listened to the one and hugged the other, widening his eyes at the wall, and wishing he wasn't the kind of person to hate someone, just a little, because they were the most important person in somebody else's life, and he wasn't.

"I don't *know* you anymore," she wailed, "—do you still—"

"He told me you just *left*," Billy cut her off. "I thought—you—I mean —"

"Oh *no*," the phone went fuzzy and muffled, but they could hear her yelling. When she came back, she took a couple deep breaths. "I'm so sorry, I—you must have thought I *died*—"

Steve cocked his head at the wall, grimacing, and wondering how *that* followed—*maybe her brain's just as jacked up as Billy's*, he thought, before she exhaled another long, shuddery breath. "I'm—I'm so—I'd never—"

"You were *scared*," Billy said, his voice even. "—you were *crying*, you were—"

"I'm sorry, honey, I'm so—" she choked off, sniffing in what sounded like a full-on lung and sinus rebellion, and took some wet wobbly breaths. "I—I'm so glad you're okay—are—are you okay?"

"You got drunk because we *weren't going anywhere*," Billy said through clenched teeth. "You made me grilled cheese, and then you had work to do, but you *never* got drunk if—if I had to get to school, or—"

"I didn't—yeah. We were home for the night. I took some shots, and —" she sighed, and sniffled. "Thought—thought it'd be fine, I was filling out—this is a long time ago, lil' critter, you sure you—"

"Yeah, *Mom*, I wanna know!"

"I was pretty drunk, and drunk people are stupid, never be an

alcoholic, son-o'-mine—”

Billy turned his head to kiss Steve's jaw, and turned back to listen, leaving Steve even more confused than he'd been seconds before. “Yeah, okay, definitely,” Billy agreed.

“I was—your dad left this—it was just insurance paperwork,” she laughed, her voice a little shaky. “It wasn't anything—I mean, I was his *wife*. He—he needed to be able to take care of you, if—if anything happened to me. I—I knew that—I *know* that, but I was drunk, and—”

“...Mom.” Billy's grip on Steve's hand went numbingly tight.

“—and you didn't see, but, uh, he'd been—he'd had a stressful week, he'd been—that morning, he didn't—I'd already had a little vodka in my V-8, you know—” Billy shook his head, and Steve pulled him closer. “—he'd—just—he'd been really—disappointed, in me, in—he'd—he just—”

“Yeah, I get—I know how he gets—” Billy cut her off, swallowing hard.

“So I was—just—”

“Scared,” Steve said automatically, and they both went quiet, and he wished he was anywhere else. “Sorry.”

“What was in the paperwork, Mom?”

“Life insurance.”

Billy tried to scramble up off the bed. Steve yanked him back, and when they had the phone pressed between their heads again—Steve half on top of Billy, lying across the bed, and feeling Billy's heart thudding through both their clothes—she was taking slow breaths.

“I know it's dumb, it was stupid to get so—so *upset*— I'm—I'm just—” she took another shuddery breath, “—it was just—he'd—he'd gotten all these—*options*—it was so—it was such an—*expensive* policy, it—it said if I died in an accident, he'd get *seven hundred thousand dollars*, I thought—baby turtle, I—I should never have driven with you in the

car, I—I was so—I was so *completely drunk* that I *drove drunk* with—with my baby in the car, I'm so, so sorry—”

“It’s okay, Mom, *jesus*,” Billy whispered.

“Yeah, He sure *musta* been watching over us that night,” she said dryly. “Kept us on the road until the *police* saved you from your mother.”

“And took you to jail,” Billy swallowed hard.

“I understood why he decided to press charges. I should—I should not have—” she took another deep breath, “—I—I was not—doing my—you were *safer*. I—understood why you didn’t get in touch—”

“He was not *safer*,” Steve cut her off, smacking Billy’s hand away from his mouth so he could talk. “Neil Hargrove’s a *shit*, he’s a—he’s a *monster*, I get why you both got *drunk*.”

“...hrm,” she hummed, and Billy tensed under him, then pushed him off.

“Why, thank you, Harrington.” Billy turned to grin down at him, shoving him flat on the bed with a sweaty hand against his collarbones. “Thank you *so much* for telling my mom I’m a fucking drunk. I’m a fag too, were you gonna mention that one? I’m screwing Steve here, Mom, isn’t that nice? Isn’t that what you *wanted to hear*?”

“The—the booze was me, kiddo, sorry, I didn’t mean to pass that on—whoops—” her laugh was as high and brittle as Billy’s, tinnier, with the phone at a few inches distance. “—I can—I can send bad photos—for you to laugh at in waiting rooms—”

“I can hear you *crying* over your *drunk fag son*—” Billy bared his teeth down at Steve, shoving to punctuate his words. Tears rolled down his cheeks. “Didn’t I grow up *nice*, Mom? I bet you’re *proud*, huh, lemme tell you about last *night*—”

“Wha—what—ye—yeah!” She yelled over him, and he stopped, rubbing his nose and sniffing. “Just—just as I—” she took a deep breath, “—just as I—I expected! Planned! Proud! You—your b-

boyfriend? *Steve*, right?”

Billy flopped to curl around Steve, still hitting at his ribs, but it didn't hurt. He pressed the phone back between their ears. “What the hell are you—”

“*Turtle*. He—he tracked me down, right, because you were *sad*, right? Because you *missed* me. Neil told you some—some *garbage*, and you—” She sounded shaky, and Billy opened his mouth with a snarl, but she cut him off. “Is—is Steve *good* to you?”

Billy smacked the phone itself, jarring Steve's ear, and growling “What the fuck, Mom, the hell is it to you, shut *up*—” and she hummed again.

“...is he nice to you, kiddo? He—he treats my kid right?”

“He's king goddamn Steve Harrington, he's good to *everyone*, he's not my *boyfriend*—” Billy glowered into Steve's face from so close he was blurry, both of them hunched around the phone.

Steve leaned to press their lips together, silently, and mouthed ‘*Love letters*.’

“That's not—shut *up*, Harrington—”

“What about my *feeblings*,” Steve whispered. “Honey-mustard, you said you—”

“He's really *fucking* good to me,” Billy said over him, his voice raw, and Steve squeezed him closer, kissing his hair. “Fucking Prince Charming *bastard*, he—he does this shit—he carries me like—”

Steve swallowed back what felt like a weight, his eyes tearing up.

“Okay, yeah,” she cut in when Billy's voice failed. “Okay, that—*that*, I—I *meant* for that, okay, that whole eight months, all right, that was—that was the big thing. My baby was gonna fall for somebody *good* to you, that's on purpose, okay, you—you send me *pictures*, of you two. I made you right, you're *perfect*, how—how dare you—how da—” she was crying as hard as Billy was, folded into Steve's shoulder. “You—you saying my kid isn't *perfect*— fight you, I'll—I'll *take* you

out, you say my kid isn't right—”

Just as Steve was resigning himself to being wedged between furious, bawling Hargroves for the rest of his natural life, Billy drew enough breath to let out an ear-shattering whoop. He rolled onto his back, punching the air, and cheering like he'd made the winning play at a championship game.

Steve could barely hear over the noise of Billy shouting, and kicking the air, so he pressed the phone entirely to his ear.

“Billy!” she shouted. “He isn't listening, is he,” she asked. “Send me some pictures, Steve Harrington, I need *wallpaper*. I gotta show up all the other parents. Wallpaper the whole d-darn *house* with my turtle's pictures. Okay?”

Steve could only nod into the phone, but she seemed to get it.

“Keep an eye on my kid for me, okay?”

“I—I'll do my best,” he whispered back, watching Billy roll to bury his face in a pillow and scream some more, and suddenly it was too much, so he shoved the phone at Billy, clambered to his feet, and stepped over him on the most direct route to the door.

Billy shouted after him, maybe—he was shouting, anyway, probably about his great mom, who was actually happy and *proud* to hear from her drunk violent kid with no friends, and *wanted* all his nerdy school portraits, and probably still had crayon artwork stuck all over her fridge.

Steve yanked his shoes on without untying them, considered finding a jacket, and then heard Billy call his name, and grabbed a hat, scarf, and the doorknob.

He trotted unsteadily down the street, his heels brushing the snow through his socks, feeling like he was running in high heels. He didn't look back when he heard the door open and close behind him, but when Billy didn't jog up alongside, he stopped to yank at his wet, knotted shoelaces until he could put his shoes on properly. He ran

from the urge to go back and cling to Billy like flypaper, like he'd wanted to cling to Nancy—like he *always* wanted to cling.

Steve wondered how much relief his mom had felt, in her own apartment, away from his stickiness. *I wanted to ask Nancy not to go to college*, he admitted to himself, finally, huffing a laugh, and imagined it as he jogged—him returning every day after work, her keeping house as his wife, raising children, stuck to flypaper. His breath clouded as he pulled on the hat, and reworked the scarf into more layers around his neck.

The run got his lungs working, stiffly, like they were trying to expand against cold wet cement, and he tried to think about something other than Billy's mom, and how she probably was *at this moment* adding weights to her bench press so she'd be able to lift her *turtle* and spin him around, when he pulled up in her drive, sugar song blasting.

He could suppress his *stupid* stickiness for the rest of the week, and be *happy* for Billy reconnecting with his mom, and being probably—now—much more enthused about getting back to California, and his beach, and away from Neil Hargrove and Steve Harrington. The thought of Billy backing out of the drive for the last time had him doubling over, and he wheezed shakily for a long minute, hands braced on his knees, then pushed himself back upright, and kept running.

By the time he stomped back into his entryway, he was mostly numb from running around in his t-shirt like a moron, and needed to blow his nose, so once he had his shoes kicked off, he pushed by Billy and ran upstairs. He lifted his broken door by the knob to swing it inward on its single hinge, then sat it back in the frame, before running his fingers through his hair and pacing around the room, shivering.

“...Harrington,” Billy's voice came through the gap where his door hung against the frame.

Steve cleared his throat, swallowed, and stalked off to the bathroom to blow his nose on some toilet paper.

“Hey.” Billy knocked at the broken door, and Steve’s lungs *clenched* again, listening to the floor creak as Billy Hargrove waited for him to respond.

He tried to take a deep breath, and it sort of worked, so he tried again, closing his eyes, and thinking fixedly about disliking plaid. “S’fine,” he managed, finally.

“...can I open the door?”

“Don’t,” Steve blurted, and then laughed under his breath, tucking his tingling hands under his arms. “I—I’ll be right—I’m not—” he snorted, trying not to just open the door and slide his hands up under Billy’s shirt, and crawl in, “—I’m not ignoring you, I just—I need a minute—”

“...want some hot chocolate?”

Go away, Steve almost yelled, clapping a hand over his mouth to cover something really embarrassing, probably a whine. “No,” he said hoarsely. “Thanks.”

“...you looked cold.”

Steve stalked over and let himself thump face-first into the mattress. “Cold out there,” he replied, wishing he was—*someone else, somebody in the mafia, maybe*, he buried his face in his arms, trying not to laugh aloud at the idea of Al Pacino emptying a revolver into Neil Hargrove, and then a swell of movie music, and Billy turning to say something idiotic, like *Steve Harrington, you’re more than an appliance*.

After a few minutes, the stairs creaked, and Steve made himself sit up, and get his homework out.

He didn’t get much done.

It had started to get dark when he heard something thump at his window. He gathered up the towels he’d wrapped up in—since blankets meant going downstairs—and trundled over to the window, waiting as another snowball fell away before opening up.

“...Hargrove.”

“Harrington. Come on, remember, ‘let’s sit down and have some hot chocolate, we’ll figure it out?’”

Steve laughed, leaning his face in his hand. “Shit. Sorry.”

“You want me to bring you some dinner?”

Steve stared at him, his lungs suddenly airless at the thought of the memories he’d have every time he looked out his window, once Billy left. He shook his head, swallowing, and forced a couple shallow breaths, while Billy stomped in place, taking a drag on his cigarette. “I—I’ll come down,” Steve managed, finally. “Thanks—thank you. Shit.”

Billy shrugged, watching him, his head cocked, and Steve took a shaky breath.

“Be—be right down.” He slid the window shut, and hung up the towels, cursing himself for wasting one of his last days with Billy staring at the plaid walls of his room. The hallway was warm when he opened his door, and he registered that his fingers had started to go numb, with his door shut against the heat, and Billy.

Billy was grilling cheese sandwiches, and Steve knocked against the counter before sliding his arms around Billy’s waist, and burying his face in Billy’s curls.

“What, did you miss me, from all the way upstairs?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, in a moment of honesty.

“You get *lost* up there?!” Billy started snickering, but Steve could feel the ear against his cheek heating, and kissed it.

The first bite of his sandwich was nearly as good tasting as kissing Billy himself, hot, crisp, and savory, and then Billy said “I’m gonna

head home,” and Steve’s stomach decided it was already too full, and inclined to climb up his esophagus.

“...what.”

“It’s been fun playing house, Harrington—”

“What,” Steve kept his eyes fixed on his sandwich, lowering it to his plate, “—wait. Wait. What—what are you—”

“What did you think, *your majesty*,” Billy snorted, his sandwich crunching as he chopped it in half. “I’m—I’m just gonna drive off into the sunset, answer your *long and riveting* letters—”

Steve’s stomach clenched harder, all his organs feeling he’d pumped them full of ice water—stiff, and too full for sandwiches, or breathing.

“You gonna tell people you got a long-distance girl, B-I-L-L-I-E?” Billy laughed, biting into his sandwich. “Fmmph. I could be your bachelor party mistake. Call me up, I’ll fly in...wherever. Shit happens at bachelor’s parties, right, nobody needs to know—”

“What the *fuck*, Hargrove,” Steve smacked his sandwich down, “—you’re—you’re not a *mistake*, Jesus.”

“What’s in this for me?” Billy kicked his foot under the table, and Steve looked up. Billy’s eyes were still red, but he was smiling. “King Steve? You don’t like my dad, so I drop out of school—he’s not gonna transfer me, y’know. You know how many jobs line up for a highschool dropout? I’ll work at *McDonald’s* for life. Weren’t you the one saying I wasn’t dumb? I get okay grades, I know, big surprise.”

Steve nodded, swallowing, and got up to get himself a glass of water, mostly to give himself an excuse to face the other way. Billy just kept talking.

“I get there and go to my *mom* before I’m eighteen, she’ll be back in prison for kidnapping a minor. I can’t even get *out* of here, I’d need chains, and snow tires, and four wheel drive—”

“Wait,” Steve tried, and Billy did, raising his eyebrows. “Wait, wait,

no—Hargrove—wait, he—he *hits* you—he hits you in the *head*—”

“Steve Harrington the hero,” Billy took another bite, blinking rapidly. “Gotta make sure everyone’s safe, so you can sleep at night. Give yourself a pat on the back, you’ve got me caring whether I graduate.”

“...so you don’t need me anymore.” Steve felt stupid staring at his sandwich, so he picked it up, and shoved some more in his face.

“Nah.” Billy shrugged, watching his face, and Steve nodded, and took another bite. It just felt like eating hot glue, now, difficult to swallow, and the edges harsh against his mouth.

He took another bite after that, hoping if he kept eating, it’d force down whatever was blocking his throat. “So when are you leaving?” he asked, proud of his even voice, and Billy dropped his sandwich, the chair creaking as he leaned back.

“What, you eager to see me gone? Just waitin’ for that big party you’re gonna throw?”

Steve shrugged, eyes on his sandwich.

“...you still...” Billy trailed off. “Shit. Harrington. We can still *fuck*, you can haul me upstairs instead of *mailing*—”

“Great,” Steve rolled his eyes, and Billy slapped his hands on the table getting up, and stomped over.

“Harrington. Come on.”

“Stop trying to fuck me out of being pissed,” Steve sat his sandwich back on the plate, and slid around Billy to set it on the counter. “I *hate* this talk, I’m going back up—”

“Wait, wait—” Billy grabbed his arm, pulling him into a rough kiss, and Steve let him. “Let’s get drunk and fuck. Come on.” His fingers dug into Steve’s arm, but kissing him felt *good*, as always, so after a moment of stiffness, Steve pressed back into it, letting Billy push him over to the counter. “Come on—” Billy whispered, “—come on, come on—”

His lips and tongue were hot, and Steve let his eyes close, ignoring the clinks as Billy reached around his head into a cupboard. Billy tried to keep kissing while flailing his hand at another cupboard, and Steve finally grabbed both his hands and pulled them together, leaning his head back and away.

"I'm not *leaving*," Steve whispered, "I just don't—"

"*Harrington*—" Billy made a soft noise in his throat, chasing after Steve's mouth, and Steve hugged all of him, tightly.

"Easy, easy, *jesus*. Easy," Steve whispered. *Slow that shit down*, he told his heart, thudding in his chest at the memory of Billy just as wild-eyed, banging on his door with a black eye and glass in his hair.

"Screw you," Billy laughed shakily. "I don't—I don't know what works, you keep getting pissed off—"

Steve hugged him tighter, sliding an arm up for a handful of curls. "M just—I'm mad at—everything—again, not—I mean—you're right, about school, this is—this is *bullshit*. Fuck. I'm sorry, I—I just—I think—"

"Don't run off somewhere again," Billy pressed up for another rough kiss, biting at Steve's jaw and lips, and rocking against his hardening dick. "—there, you're getting into it, let me—just—just—" He backed away, eyes flicking from Steve's hands to the sink. "Jussec," He opened a cupboard, fumbled with a massive water glass, and nearly dropped it before yanking down the bottle of cherry vodka and pouring most of its contents in. "Drink up first."

"What?!"

"It's just vodka, *Harrington*, come on—"

"It's like half a bottle." Steve blinked at him, stepping closer.

Billy jerked back, folding his arms. "Drink the fuck up, your *majesty*."

"I'm not—why do you want me drunk," Steve held his hands up, trying to look harmless. "You gonna set me on fire?"

Billy stumbled backwards into the fridge, edging back into the front room. “I didn’t fucking set anything on fire. You didn’t have to hit me so damn hard, I didn’t fucking—I didn’t use the *tequila*—”

“Fuck you, you fell! It was an accident, I didn’t—”

“Yeah, fuck you. Drink the damn liquor, asshole,” Billy sat on the edge of the couch, teeth bared. “When I tell you how I wanna fuck I don’t want you *accidentally* shoving my hands in the garbage disposal.”

“What,” Steve swallowed, feeling a throb of attention zinging between his stomach and his dick, “—no. What. Why would—”

“Or whatever,” Billy growled. “Drink up or I’m out. Get blurry.”

“...won’t take this much,” Steve eyed the glass. “I’ll—”

“Fine.”

“Wait, Hargrove, c’mere,” Steve flapped a hand at him, and he edged closer. “C’mon. I know you—you’re—”

Billy raised his eyebrows, folding his arms, and leaned back against the cupboards by the stove. He smiled the way he had before he’d broken a plate on Steve’s face, in the Byers’ house. “Where you going with this, Harrington?”

“Look, I’m sorry I didn’t try harder to catch you when you clonked you head on the door, but—” he flailed a hand at Billy’s snort, “—maybe I coulda caught you? I don’t know? I just mean, come on, you *meant* to beat the shit out of me, can’t they like—cancel out, or something, I’d try harder to catch you now, asshole.”

“...I did chuck bottles at your house,” Billy laughed, rolling his shoulders.

“That—that didn’t hurt anything,” Steve squinted at him. “Don’t—okay, you beat my face in, you slammed me around the basketball court—” he rolled his eyes, “—can we just—can we just start fresh, from there, I’m sorry I didn’t catch you before your head hit the door—I didn’t think—god, I didn’t think you’d—I thought you’d just hit

the *edge*, get a bump—”

“Sorry I *played basketball*, your pussyship—”

“Shut up. Hargrove. You really think I’d—” he grimaced at the garbage disposal, and Billy clenched his fingers on the edge of the counter.

“I won’t know what you’ll do until you’ve *done* it, genius.” He raised his eyebrows.

“Shit, yeah, okay.” Steve turned to consider the vodka, and Billy snickered, stepping over to press a kiss against the side of his mouth, before tromping upstairs. Steve tipped back the glass. He took a couple swallows, then poured the rest down the sink, running his tongue over his teeth with a grimace.

When Billy tromped back down, he was naked except for his socks and Steve’s sweatshirt, and he shoved by to grab the vodka bottle and tip it back for a long swallow.

Steve grabbed it, and him, pulling them apart. “Hargrove, if you have to be bombed, I don’t think—”

“Shut up,” Billy yanked the shirt Steve was wearing up over his head, “—I’m *ready*, we can just go, c’ *mon*, your *majesty*—”

Steve wriggled out of the shirt and tossed it aside, but held Billy out by the shoulders. “Hey, hey, hey—hey. We can—we can do something that doesn’t freak you out—”

“I’m trusting you enough to *take a fucking risk*, okay,” Billy breathed against his mouth, and Steve kissed him, stroking his palms down the sweatshirt material, over Billy’s shoulders and ribs.

He rubbed the edge of his thumb over the head of Billy’s dick a few times, to hear him grunt “shit” and push closer, and slid his hands up under the sweatshirt, along Billy’s warm hipbones. “You like it, when I grab your hair, right,” he whispered across Billy’s ear, feeling him shudder.

“Do it.” His voice was husky. Steve got distracted, though, by the look of him, circles under his half-lidded eyes and lips red with kissing, in a loose sweatshirt, and the expanse of warm skin underneath. He smoothed his palms up Billy’s back, pressing him closer for a kiss, then got a double handful of his butt. Billy laughed, sliding both arms around his neck, and wrapping a leg around his waist. “—it’s—it’s not *lingerie*, moron—I’m just cold—”

“It’s soft,” Steve slid a handful of the sweatshirt against Billy’s side, and he hummed, his arms tightening. Steve pulled Billy’s other leg up, lifting him out to the front room, and Billy started laughing, leaning in for more kisses.

“Don’t drop me,” he whispered, against Steve’s lips, and Steve shifted an arm around his waist, kissing him to cut off his “—after all that vodka—”, and knelt on the edge of the mattress to tip a snickering Billy back into the covers. He blinked up, smile shaky, and Steve crawled over him to slowly unzip the sweatshirt a few inches, and lean down to taste his collarbones. As he left an even, shiny trail of hickeys, Billy laughed harder, squirming under him and patting clumsily at his hair and shoulders. His bandaids caught in Steve’s hair. Steve’s thumb, pressed against Billy’s cheek, started catching tears, so he stopped for a kiss.

“You okay?”

Billy bit his lips together, nodding and swallowing, and Steve kissed his inner wrist, sliding the sweatshirt sleeve up so he could kiss all the Sharpie hearts. It wouldn’t slide over Billy’s elbow, and there was an unknissed heart in there—the H+H one—so Steve just stuck his tongue between the cuff and Billy’s arm, going “MNEEEH,” and Billy smacked his face away, shaking with laughter. He had tears running across his face. Steve kissed a few of them away, and then down Billy’s throat, lowering the zipper a couple extra inches to see more *Billy*. He kissed across from armpit to armpit, while Billy laughed too hard to shove him away, and pulled his legs up so his feet nudged at Steve’s butt.

“You still cold?” Steve asked, grinning, and ignoring how hot his face was. “I could kiss you back up—”

“Don’t you *fucking dare*,” Billy cackled, tucking his fingers in the top of Steve’s jeans. “How the hell long does it take you to unwrap *presents*, *jesus chri*—”

“—no, I’m—I’m faster at that,” Steve slid a hand down to the bottom of the sweatshirt, rubbing up and down the cold skin of Billy’s butt and thigh. “There’s never anything as good inside—”

Billy grabbed him by the hair, yanking him down for a long kiss, and then just pressed their foreheads together, panting. “*Jesus* you’re sweet when you’re drunk. Don’t sober up. Christ.”

“Not that drunk,” Steve whispered back, and Billy started snickering again.

“You’re *bombed*, you’re all into my sweatshirt.”

“My sweatshirt,” Steve corrected, kissing across his flushed cheeks. “You—did you, uh, you wanted me plastered so I’d be sweet?”

“Want you to fuck my ass,” Billy whispered back, lifting himself up on his elbows to deepen the kiss. “Come on, I’m gonna die of old age here, I’m wide open,” Billy jerked at the zipper of Steve’s jeans, “—I’m so full of lube I’m lying in it. You can just shove in, I’m all wet and soft like. Like a fucking—get these *off*, Harrington—”

Steve swallowed, grabbing at Billy’s hands, then swallowed again as his saliva glands reacted to Billy’s description like he’d just been handed a steak. “Jesus. Does—does that—does it feel *good*? W—wait—”

Billy leaned up for a kiss, running his thumbs over Steve’s collarbones. “Take your jeans off...*Harrington*.”

“You smell like some lady’s perfume,” Steve snickered, giggles rising in him at the thought of the vodka he’d downed. He ran his fingers through Billy’s damp curls, drawing him closer to smell his head. “Unless it’s you?”

“Fuck you, Harrington, it’s my conditioner, I’ve got conditioner up my ass,” Billy panted into his neck, and Steve started giggling helplessly.

“Your *conditioner*?” he asked, running his fingers through the feathery curls, and feeling Billy’s cheeks bunch in a wide smirk.

“Shut up, it works—”

“How come you got four thousand weird condoms and no lube,” Steve whispered, and Billy cracked up laughing, smacking a hand over his face.

“It was this *edible* shit—”

“No—” Steve snorted. “No, no, no—”

“They ate it, they ate it *all*, Harrington, just tipped back the bottle, your friends are *animals*—”

Steve kissed him, toothy with laughter, as ever noticing Billy’s mouth tasted so much sweeter than it sounded. It tasted like smoke, cherry vodka and *peppermint chocolate*, actually, and Steve licked his lips, running his thumbs over Billy’s cheekbones before getting batted away. He wondered if Billy’d made himself Steve’s hot chocolate, waiting downstairs. Or made it for Steve, hoping he’d come out.

“You got a condom?” Steve whispered, sliding his hands down to push Billy’s legs up—they’d warmed, his whole body flushed and hot—and run a thumb along his inner thigh. Billy’s feet jerked.

“Just shove in,” he panted, “—hurry the fuck up, Harrington.” He ran his fingers through Steve’s hair, tangling them where the hairspray stuck it together.

“Come on,” Steve snickered into the kiss, “—don’t you want—I think I picked up a leopard print one at Carol’s—”

“Bareback. Come the fuck *on*, fill me up—” Billy wrapped his legs around Steve’s waist.

“What the fuck, I know you were—you were being—careful—with Tommy and Carol—” Steve started to pull back, and Billy tightened his legs, and grabbed Steve’s hair—not yanking, but holding him in place.

"No, you said," he leaned up to bite at Steve's lips and chin, "I needed tests, and I need to stay clean, if I'm gonna keep crawling in your lap. That—that's the rule."

Steve stared down at him. "So you're gonna screw your way through the—through the whole *laundromat*, but I shouldn't suit up, because..?"

"They're so we can fuck bare," Billy yanked him closer again. "Come on, do it—"

"What?"

"I gotta be clean, if I want you, right," Billy whispered against his mouth, squirming so their dicks brushed, and Steve grunted, closing his eyes. "Or you won't get near me. I've been safe, I carry 'em, you can just sink in—come on, your majesty, I'm clean, I'm clean, I won't get you dirty—"

Something didn't seem right, and Steve tried to think what it was, avoiding the cat scratches as he ran the backs of his knuckles down Billy's stomach to feel him shudder. "How come *I* don't have to wear one, sweet—sweet cream—" he leaned in for a sloppy kiss, squeezing a handful of Billy's ass, and felt his pulse thud through his veins, heating him like a furnace.

"...thought I told you last night." Billy laughed unsteadily, squirming against him. "Remember?"

He unzipped the sweatshirt before him, like parting the tide. "Remember what," Steve whispered against Billy's dick, and his hips jerked.

"You prick, stop it, I'll come—" he hissed, and Steve laughed.

"You—you sure you don't want me to bag it? I'll do whatever you want."

"The fuck is wrong with you, *whatever I want*," Billy punched his shoulder, "—what if I had a *corkscrew*?"

"What the fuck," Steve stopped, staring down at him.

“Lemme roll over, you don’t really want all of this in your—” Billy started to roll, then yelped out a “Jesus *fuck*,” as Steve struck fast, like a *cobra*, bending to smack wet kisses down Billy’s stomach. Billy was starting to glisten a little, in the Christmas lights, and Steve unzipped the sweatshirt the final couple of inches, scooting to kiss the line from Billy’s bellybutton down. The skin under his lips trembled as Billy laughed, clenching his legs around Steve’s head and shoulders.

It felt kinda dirty, having sex in the fort Will built, and Steve felt his face flush further. He’d forgotten Billy was a little ticklish—his legs flailed as he yelled “Harrington!” a few times, alternating with “bastard” and “jesus”, before Steve spread the sweatshirt away from Billy’s sides, and mouthed down his belly to lick firmly up his dick, root to tip.

It’d be faster, Steve thought, *to just jack it myself, and lick his*. Billy looked so *close*, head back, eyes fluttering shut, sweat glistening across his chest, the slow drip of precum gleaming in the Christmas lights as he writhed under Steve’s tongue. Steve slid a hand down Billy’s butt until he felt wetness, recognizing the smell of the conditioner, and unzipped himself with his other hand, shoving his pants down.

“Come on, Harrington. It’s just a hole. Just use it—doesn’t make you—god,” Billy grunted as Steve slid a finger inside, where Billy was hot and tight and starting to go sticky where the lube was drying. “I’m the—I’m the piece of shit—begging for it.”

“You’re the best shit,” Steve mumbled, kissing Billy’s bent knee, and sliding two fingers in in fascination. “Jesus, look at you.”

Billy whined, jerking against him, then kicked him in the ribs. “Get your *hand* outta my *ass*, I’m gonna—*christ*.”

“Sorry. Sorry. You okay, though?”

“Fine, it’s just. It’s sore. ” Billy lowered his lashes as Steve knelt awkwardly between Billy’s legs, their dicks brushing.

“You kinda whined...” Steve leaned in to run his thumb up Billy’s

cheek with his cleaner hand, and Billy leaned into it, closing his eyes. His chin jerked up as Steve's stomach pressed their cocks together. "Hey." Steve propped himself on his elbows, "—we could just—"

"It's *fine*, *jesus*." Billy rolled his hips, his firm thigh muscles and abs lifting himself and Steve an inch off the bed, and Steve choked, letting himself fall forward to bury his face in Billy's neck. Billy huffed, laughing.

"...god, you feel good," Steve whispered, licking the salt off his neck.

"...you're lying on a guy's dick," Billy cackled. "You're so *drunk*, Harrington, *jesus*."

"Not that drunk." Steve let their dicks drag against each other as he hitched himself up for a kiss. "You just feel good. You're—you look all happy." The pulse under Steve's fingers sped up as he bit at Billy's chapped lips, and licked into his mouth.

"God, you're so drunk." Billy kissed back, fingers clenched in Steve's hair, and jeans. Steve tried not to move too suddenly, but he reached out for a pillow, and Billy grabbed his wrists, growling "—gonna give me some more bruises?"

"No, yeah, you don't need any more bruises," Steve paused, watching him pant. "You...you sure you're, uh, ready for this?"

"Shove on in, just—just lemme roll over."

Steve paused, leaning in for another taste of Billy's mouth as he thought, then bit gently at Billy's stubble and the delicate skin under his jaw until he started cursing and kicking the air. "What—"

"Fucking—*move*. Let me flip over, you don't want my—" he snorted, waving a hand at his cock.

Steve bit his lip, thinking. "What if I do?"

"You *fucking don't*, you'll—you'll wake up tomorrow and—" his breaths were coming faster, and Steve leaned his elbows on either

side of Billy's head, sliding his fingers in the feathered waves as Billy squirmed underneath him. Every time his brain started to haze into physical sensation, Billy winced, or swallowed hard, and Steve had to remind himself Billy wasn't gonna be like having sex with anyone else.

"Hey," Steve whispered, kissing him openmouthed. "If you really want somebody in there again. What if I just push your legs up and sink in." Billy made a raw noise deep in his throat, his eyes going shiny, and Steve slowly scooted himself over to crouch alongside him. "Is that what you want? Jesus. You—you *sure*? You're not gonna be able to sit *down* tomorrow. Want me to just jack you off?"

"Look more like a chick from the back," Billy laughed up, and Steve rolled his eyes and swung his leg over Billy's waist, sitting across his chest and arms, and leaning in for another kiss as Billy made a noise in his throat that might have emerged as a yelp.

"Shit, shit, sorry," Steve scrambled to hands and knees, trying not to hold any of Billy down. "I know not to pin you, I keep forgetting, sorry—"

Billy took a shaky breath, then reached up and rested his hand around Steve's neck, swallowing. "You fucking—you—if you beat on me I'll slice you open with a *broken bottle*, Harrington, if you put your hands on my neck—"

"Shit, I won't. God damn." Steve leaned in to kiss him, sliding his un-lubed thumb in the side of Billy's mouth as an additional gag. "I'm not gonna kick your ass, dude. You had a better idea." He grinned at Billy's snort.

Billy jerked his head away to talk. "Get in me, fuckhead."

"Yeah," Steve whispered back, clenching his hand in Billy's hair to feel him slump, groaning eagerly into his mouth. When he lifted his hands, Billy flinched away, so he put them back down and didn't lift them, sliding his fingertips down Billy's side, and following them with his lips along Billy's warm, toned skin as he crawled backwards. When he cupped Billy's butt, he found the conditioner. It was more sticky than slippery. "...you sure you aren't too sore?" he asked,

pushing Billy's legs apart with his elbow, and rubbing his finger over the reddened, shiny skin.

"Shit—" Billy's voice cracked, and his legs jerked, so Steve did it again, watching Billy's eyes flutter shut, and his panting make his chest flex and gleam under the Christmas lights. Steve reached down to rub some precome over his own dick, wishing he had some lotion or something, and at the motion Billy's jaw flexed, and he grabbed at the marker on his arms, digging his nails in. He'd gone from his relaxed sprawl to breathing shallowly, and Steve stopped, rubbing his thumb up and down Billy's rim. It didn't smell, or anything, which was a relief, and he wondered if Billy'd washed it earlier.

How'd he get soap in there? Steve wondered, stroking the smooth skin, and Billy smacked a hand over his face to cut off a moan. Steve leaned in, and Billy's legs twitched again—towards each other, like his arms. *Like he's trying to protect himself.* Steve bit his lips, then leaned in and swiped his tongue over the tip of Billy's prick.

"WAAH don't!" Billy yelped, as his dick leapt against Steve's mouth. *"Shit, I'm sorry, shit, Harrington, please, please—"*

"What are you begging for... Billy," Steve breathed across it, and Billy *came all over his face.* He propped himself up on his elbows, eyes already tearing up, and Steve patted his knee, trying to wipe the jizz out of his eye, and firming his lips against the liquid dripping down them.

Billy started muttering under his breath, shaking his head, and Steve snorted, patted his knee again, and staggered off to the kitchen.

"Shit god damn it fucking whore bitch bastard—" Billy yelled. *"Harrington, c'mon, please, I'm sorry, come back, you can still—I'll suck your dick, whatever you want—"*

"Just a minute," Steve yelled back, getting the stuff in his mouth, and wrinkling his nose thoughtfully. *"...not too bad, really,"* he called over his shoulder, before sticking his head under the faucet. When he lifted it again, Billy was still saying something, but it sounded like he'd stuck his head in the pillows. *"Hey, knight, you want me to just jack off? Since—"*

There was another explosion of something in the pillows, and Steve grimaced. "I'm not mad, just sayin'—"

Billy had his head buried in pillows, but he shoved them away as Steve dropped next to him.

"Shit," he mumbled, his voice gone high. "Fuck, fuck, fuck—"

Steve pulled him in, their skin sticking together, and pressed his cheek to Billy's sweaty hair. "Breathe. Come on. Breathe in."

"You're gonna *murder* me," Billy choked out a laugh. Warm water dripped in Steve's ear. "Once you sober up. You—you been pissed all day—you're gonna fucking—drag me behind your car. Fucking—fucking fag just—"

Steve yanked him closer, kissing him open mouthed. Every time Billy took a breath to speak, Steve held their mouths together again, until Billy shoved him off to roll away and use his wrists to wipe his nose. "...you're licking my snot, you dumb shit," he gasped out, and Steve grabbed a handful of sheet and scrubbed it over his face, then Billy's, before letting him bat it away.

"What the hell are you doing, Hargrove," Steve spooned up behind him, sliding a hand around to run up and down Billy's shuddering stomach.

"Shoulda drunk the other half the bottle," Billy snorted, blowing his nose in the sheet and shoving it away. "Christ."

"...because...if I see I'm fucking a *guy*, I'll lose my shit or—"

Billy exploded in a rage of profanity, and Steve clamped a hand over his mouth, feeling the buzz of words against his palm, and tears pooling and spilling over between the web of his thumb and Billy's nose.

"Shut up so I can move my hand, or you'll drown," he whispered, and Billy snorted, snickering into the bedclothes when Steve pulled his hand back to wipe it against the bottom sheet in front of Billy's face.

Billy mumbled something, elbowing him.

“What?”

“...nothing, just.”

“...what?” Steve ran his palm over Billy’s ribs, feeling the muscles.

“Your dick’s digging into my ass.”

“What?!” Steve scooted back, taking a calming breath. “Sorry! Sorry. Shit. I just—I’m not—I’m not mad, I’m—not always mad, sometimes I’m just...” He sighed, watching a trickle of sweat run down Billy’s shoulderblade. He wanted to lick it. His dick twitched. “Sorry. Damn it. Shit.”

“What the *fuck’s* been wrong with you,” Billy muttered. “All day. What—what the hell d’you *want*— I was gonna cheer you up with a good lay,” he sighed, his breath coming easier. “Something I practiced a lot, y’know—”

Steve pushed away and rolled onto his back, sighing. He rubbed his face.

“Screw you!” Billy reached over and smacked his arm. “I’m *sorry*, the fuck did I do *now*.”

“It’s stupid,” Steve sighed, staring up at the Christmas lights. “Sorry. Sorry I keep freaking you out.”

“What is it,” Billy rolled to flop chest-to-chest, staring into Steve’s face from inches away, and Steve squirmed under him.

“God, just cause *you* already came you’re all smug, lemme jack *off*, already—”

“Maybe.” Billy licked his lips, grinning, and Steve’s hips jerked. “Tell me.”

“I—I don’t want to, it’s dumb,” Steve forced a grin, “—you’ll laugh.”

Billy opened his mouth, then shut it, cocking his head. “Tell me. Or I’ll sit across you and let my ass *just* brush your cock—”

Steve jerked underneath him, trying to whine and laugh at the same time. His throat felt raw, and he swallowed. “You—you just—you keep—you keep talking about—” To Steve’s horror, his eyes started stinging again, and his lungs bucked in his chest, and he bit his lips, squeezing his eyes shut. He could suddenly barely breathe through his nose, so he held his breath. *Get it together, get it together*, he told himself, swallowing over and over.

Billy scrambled closer, and Steve felt him pressing kisses over his face. He lost control of his lungs and started actually *crying* for the *third time in one day* when Billy yanked him close, pressing Steve’s face into his naked shoulder. “Jesus H. Christ,” Billy whispered in his ear, stroking his hair. His fingers shook.

“Shit,” Steve muttered, trying to pull away and wipe his face, but Billy hugged him tighter.

“Don’t make me take drastic measures,” Billy laughed shakily. “Spit it out.”

“I don’t want to be an *appliance*,” Steve blurted out, sick with his own over-emotional clinginess, and Billy went perfectly still. “*Fuck*. I told you it’s dumb—”

“No, wait,” Billy slid his fingers into Steve’s hair, holding him close. Steve avoided looking into his eyes, dark under only the strings of Christmas lights. “M-maybe I got it wrong. You—you want me to be just—just King Steve’s? Just *your* knight.”

“That’s not—I wasn’t—” Steve reached up to stroke his thumb over Billy’s cheek while he closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. “I didn’t—think about it. I thought—” *I thought I’d be enough, for once*. He snorted, squeezing his eyes shut to stop the burning sensation. “I didn’t—I wasn’t trying to like—lay down a law. I just—it’s—whatever. Keep using all your—all your fruit flavors, I don’t care.”

“You don’t care,” Billy repeated, and Steve nodded.

There was a sharp pain in his lungs, and he tried to breathe around it. “Yeah, it’s—fine.”

“You don’t sound *fine*, Harrington, *jesus*.”

“I’ll get over it. It’s your life. Whatever.” He could hear the bitterness creeping in, and took a deep breath. “Whatever you want to do.”

Billy bit his lips, surveying Steve’s face. “...yeah, okay, you look pissed. Just—just tell me what you *want*.”

I want you to think I’m enough, Steve thought, wondering whether it would come through, if he shouted it loud enough in his head. *I want you to want me more than anyone else. God, Steve, way to be selfish, he hasn’t even gotten away from his dad, like he needs you trying to—*he looked at Billy’s shirt. His sweatshirt, that Billy was still wearing. “...I don’t—I don’t want anything, I don’t wanna order you around. Do—do whatever, I won’t get pissed.” At Billy’s frustrated growl, he forced a grin. “I mean it. I’m not gonna tell you what to do.”

“You wanna be my only washer, right?”

Steve cringed. “God, I’m such a piece of—”

“Like a boyfriend,” Billy’s intent eyes came into sharp focus as Steve blinked, “—Harrington. *Harrington*. Is that what you want?”

Steve sighed, and took another steadying breath, trying to get himself together.

“Is it you don’t want to share *anybody*,” Billy leaned sideways to watch his face, “—or is it *me*.”

“S’why I fought Jonathan Byers,” Steve huffed a laugh, wiping his nose on his arm, “—I thought Nancy was sleeping around—she was just—she was trying to find her friend, and her boyfriend just shows up and starts throwing punches—”

“Yeah, I figured.” Billy nodded, fingers clenching his own forearms again.

“Hey, *jesus*, stop, you’re gonna be covered in bruises—” Steve grabbed a sweatshirted arm, and pushed up the sleeve, running his thumb up Billy’s forearm with a grimace. “Shit, I thought this was a

good idea, why d'you keep picking at them?"

"What the hell was I even *doing* last night," Billy said, with a snort, watching Steve's face.

"I—I do need to—" Steve took a deep breath, leaning his face in his hands, processing the inner stickiness that reminded him if he was *too* honest, Billy would probably *try* to feel like Steve wanted him to.

"I should—I mean, you said a *lot* of shit while you were—"

"Oh fuck, of course I did," Billy sighed. "Probably begged for it. You can ignore all that—"

"No, no, I'm not ignoring you, just—shit. I—you were *happy* with the shit I said last night—why're you—"

"Let's fuck," Billy pulled away, "—I don't need to hear this."

"No, wait," Steve wiped his eyes, grabbing Billy by the sleeve on his shoulder and pulling him back face to face. "What—what do you want? You didn't say anything bad, what do you—"

"Screw you, okay, you pissed on my leg already, you *know* what I want, you said I *told* you that shit—like a fucking idiot—"

"I *what*—?"

"You don't want *me*, you just don't want me bringing anything gross home," Billy snorted. "I *get* it—"

"Shit no, no—" Steve rubbed his nose again, "—eugh. You, uh, want me to want...you? As—as—like *you* said, like a boyfriend. You—would you want to—do that?"

Billy shrugged, and Steve's heart thumped a little. "Thought I, 'uh,' spilled my whole heart last night," he snorted. "You said I—"

"Shut up, dickhead, you just said—you said *sober* Billy loved me," Steve rolled his eyes, "—and *then* you said you wanted a *bearded black goat* so you could *ride* it into, like—uh," he squinted, "I can't remember the name of the band concert thing—"

Billy choked, coughed, and burst out laughing, and Steve leaned in to kiss his cheek, biting along his stubble.

“You said my nicknames were dumb, you—you kinda tried to teach me to drive stick—”

Billy laughed harder, sliding his hand down Steve’s stomach, and Steve jerked away, though his hard-on was coming back now he was over his crying jag.

“You said a bunch of *crap*, basically, *Hargrove*, you got more to say to me?”

“...the goat sounds pretty rad,” Billy smirked, leaning into a kiss.

“Pretty sure you said I was a *jelly sandwich* while you were falling over in the snow, trying to grab my ass,” Steve said flatly, feeling like an idiot—the kind of idiot who passed notes with checkboxes saying ‘DO YOU LIKE ME? Y/N’.

Billy huffed a laugh, swallowing. “...you wanna know I’m not going anywhere. That’s—that what this is. Billy going to fuck off, or—or just hang around. Shit.”

“No, it’s fine,” Steve laughed unsteadily. “I know you’re gonna fuck off—”

“Shit. No, okay, I won’t. I’ll—” Billy took a breath as shaky as Steve’s. “I—I’m staying, Harrington, I’ll—I’ll be at the other end of the phone when you want a fuck, I’ll—I want pictures of you in your goddamn prom suit, I’ll—I’ll be forty fucking years old and hoping you get off work early and horny and wanna drop by, christ. I’ll be dodging my boss asking why I’m so fucking stupid after lunch because you *drove by* and you *smiled*, you *fucking idiot moron*.”

He flinched away from Steve’s hands pulling him close, and Steve hugged him sideways, as tight as he could. He couldn’t tell which of their hearts was pounding harder. “Don’t make me be your best man,” Billy muttered into his collar. “My wedding present’ll be not driving off a fucking bridge—you want me to love you so goddamn much, why the hell are you pissed I wanna stay—”

"I don't want you to get *hurt*," Steve hissed, burying his face in Billy's shoulder, "—I don't want you to go, but I don't—your—your dad's gonna—" he took a deep breath, and Billy grabbed his shoulder and pulled him to fall backwards halfway into Billy's lap and into a hug. Steve let himself relax into it, laughing. "Sorry, shit. I didn't—" Billy bit his ear, and Steve kicked, trying to elbow him, "—augh, *asshole* —"

"So are we *dating*?"

Steve leaned his head back, eyes narrowed. "Will you go on a *date* with me?"

"Hmm." Billy licked Steve's ear where he'd bitten him, breathing across it. "Do I get to blow you in the back of the theater?"

Steve twitched. His dick thought that was a *great* plan. "I don't wanna go to pick you up and—and find you having—I mean—no *banana man* sex with, um—"

"No fucking Tommy? Eugh," Billy snickered. "You sure? I bet he'd let you join in. You don't wanna lick Tommy's banana, Harrington?"

"How come you *did* it, but I have to remember more *about* it," Steve groaned.

"You don't want me to get any banana dick," Billy yanked Steve's chin up for a kiss, "—I don't need any banana dick."

"What," Steve snorted.

"You want this ass all to yourself, it's yours." Billy shrugged. "Just don't fucking—don't start dating some bitch without telling me."

"What," Steve asked again, leaning his head back to blink up at Billy's chin, and the Christmas lights.

"You get back with Nancy, you better *come tell me* that shit, don't—don't just let me *find out*, asswipe—"

Steve squinted up at him. "...if I wanna date somebody else I have to break up with you first? I mean...yeah, Hargrove, that's kinda how it

works—same here—”

“Was that all of it?” Billy leaned to mouth down his neck, biting his jugular, and Steve’s whole body jerked back to full attention.

“What? Christ,” he snorted, leaning his head to the side so Billy could leave marks all the way down his shoulder.

“You want me all to yourself,” Billy squeezed him, humming, then let go, “—you want me to—” he cleared his throat, “—love you, so I won’t leave you lonely, right—but was that *all*? You threw my mom at my head, just about—”

Steve did not want to explain he’d been jealous of *Billy Hargrove’s parental situation*, definitely not so jealous that he’d then hidden in his room all day in a nest of towels. He cleared his throat. “...she have anything else to say?”

“She’s gonna start lifting more,” Billy snorted. “I told her I could always carry *her* around if she was weak in her old age, she quoted some commandments at me. I told her respecting your parents also means not giving them a *hernia*. I dunno. She said there was somebody at work she had to ask a ton of questions.”

“She’s got a Nancy,” Steve grinned at his fingers, interlocked with Billy’s, and *didn’t* hate him for how relaxed he sounded, talking about his mom, who carried his photos everywhere.

“Yeah, I guess. Was that it?”

“What?” Steve leaned up for a kiss, but Billy pulled back.

“There’s a rule, your fucking majesty. You gotta tell me why you’re pissed. Was that all? Just had to know this dumb drunk was wrapped around your little finger?”

“...Will said you took those Polaroids and hid ‘em in your music.”

“That little fink bastard,” Billy growled, as his ears reddened, “—how *that* didn’t clue you in—”

Steve stared, biting his lips, and didn’t say *you’re the only person who’s*

ever—, coming out instead with something that had been sitting on the back of his tongue since Billy had trembled underneath him. “You should fuck *me*, really,” was what came out of his mouth. He sounded weirdly hoarse, to himself, but Billy just squinted at him.

“What the hell?”

“Sober,” Steve took a deep breath, pushing his successful derail, “—Fuck me. Sober. Then you’ll know it’s fine, you won’t have to flip out every time over—if—if things are too gay.”

“Jesus,” Billy stared at him, swallowing. “Keep talking.” He grabbed the back of Steve’s head and let himself fall backwards, yanking Steve on top of him. Steve caught himself with one hand on the mattress and his forearm across Billy’s chest. At Billy’s pained “—shit, Harrington—” Steve flailed around, bracing himself over his idiot *boyfriend*, and leaned in to kiss him.

“Keep sweet-talking me,” Billy whispered, between kisses. “Tell me I’m good again. Good boy,” he laughed, stroking his fingers through Steve’s hair. “Be nice to your fucking dog, *King Steve*.” He wrapped his legs around Steve’s waist, pulling him close, and Steve finally shoved his jeans down, and kicked them off, kneeling in a pile of denim and belt. “Shove in, it’s fine, it’s *fine*—”

“Christ,” Steve whispered back, as Billy tried to manhandle him into position, and his dick rubbed across the sticky remaining conditioner. “I’m slipperier than you are—”

“Fuck me,” Billy panted, reaching down to grab Steve’s cock and try to maneuver him inside. “Come *on*, your majesty, not gonna get *wet*, I can’t *do* that—”

He was hot and stickily *tight* inside, and he braced himself as Steve pushed in, his knuckles clenching white in the sheets.

Steve shifted back, wincing as he pulled out, and Billy’s voice cut off in a whine. “Just a minute, christ, shut up.” Steve slid his hand down to rub Billy’s stomach, frowning around.

“You fucking *asshole*, come *back*, d’you want me to *beg*— tell me—tell

me what to—” Billy sat up on his elbows, snarling, and Steve clambered up from between Billy's legs and stroked his thigh.

“Just a minute.” He trotted into the kitchen, glad no neighbors were close enough to see his dick a-swingin’, and grimaced around the kitchen, checking cupboards. He bit his lips as he frowned into the fridge, and ended up laughing silently with his head against the refrigerator door before running back to kick his jeans aside, and kneel again between Billy's legs.

“Fuck you,” Billy kicked at him. “Get back here—”

“Hang on a second, *jesus*,” Steve fumbled with the tub of Parkay margarine, scooping up a fingerload and rubbing it up Billy's ass.

Grunting softly, Billy let his head loll back. “...I coulda taken it. Don't have to...*jesus*, Steve—” he lifted his head to grin, glanced at the tub in Steve's hands, and dropped back to the bed, wheezing with laughter. “The—*margarine*—that's fucking—you're—” he cackled, wrapping his legs around Steve's waist and dragging him closer. “You're *buttering me up*,” he whispered, and Steve tried to kiss him, but they were both grinning so hard their teeth clacked together.

“You suck,” Steve informed him, making a face as he dug his fingers in the tub of Parkay. “...it's all up under my fingernails.”

“Cut them the hell *off*, then,” Billy's head shot up again.

“You can't tell, moron,” Steve rolled his eyes, “—they're short! It's just gross!”

“Oh, it's so *nice* for me, that shit's *cold*,” Billy smacked his arm. “It was *fine*.”

“Yeah...” Steve rubbed it in, his thumb catching against Billy's rim, and Billy relaxed back on the bed, flopping his arm over his face. Steve could still see the flush deepening on his cheeks, and down his neck and chest. “What do you mean sweet talk? Whaddaya want me to say?”

Billy snorted, grabbing a pillow and hugging it to his face. “Nng. Shut up.” He flinched back, then let his legs fall awry against the bed

with a groan as Steve rubbed another dollop of margarine on Billy's dick, just slowly smoothing it on with his callused thumb. "Wh-what the—*Steve*— I'm not gonna—I can't—"

Steve watched his boyfriend's abs flex, blushing to realize he was grinning away. "What am I supposed to say?"

"Nothing," came Billy's muffled voice. "...fffuck off, god, jesus, Harrington," he moaned, as Steve rubbed slick fingers up *nearly* into his ass—and then stopped. Billy's legs jerked. "Shit, what, what's wrong," his voice went lighter.

"What were you gonna ask for," Steve asked, running his thumb up and down at the point Billy's thigh began, watching as his legs started to shake.

"Fuck you!" Billy smacked at him with the heel of his hand, but between the pillow over his face and his whole body shuddering, there wasn't any strength to it.

"Ask me," every time Steve spoke, Billy's dick drooled a little, so he leaned in to breathe his words across it. "Maybe I'll listen."

"*SHIT FUCK, please,*" Billy yelped. "Say your *fucking* boyfriend bullshit, say it—"

Jesus god, Steve paused, feeling his face flame up red. *What?!* Remembering Billy's usual violent reactions when he got embarrassed, he got his thumb moving again as a distraction, ducking his head with a grin as Billy's legs locked around his arm the second his finger slipped inside. "Haveta lemme move, babe," he said, dodging the flailed blow. "What should I say? Talk about my *feelings?*"

"Fuck you," Billy whispered. "That's enough, stop."

"Batting cage date, maybe—" Steve grabbed another wad of margarine, holding his breath as he oiled himself up.

"Fucking *stop*," Billy's voice got thready as Steve worked another dollop up inside him, melting it into hot flesh with his thumb. "God, that's—hurry the *fuck* up, Harrington—"

"I wanna take you whitewater rafting," Steve told him, cocking his head, trying to decide how much of the muffled grunting was pain, "—you still okay?"

"Fuck you," Billy's voice sounded hoarse and wet.

"I will." Steve steadied his cock with one hand, and squeezed a long stroke up Billy's dick as he pressed his own into the new territory of another man's ass.

Billy curled around his pillow, but locked his legs tighter around Steve's waist and thighs, and Steve stalled out for a long second just inside, feeling like Billy's car, stunned into engine failure and rolling back off the ice. He took a deep breath, trying not to come—not that he hadn't already made it longer than *Billy*, he thought, snickering.

"You—you okay if I move?" Steve asked, and the pillow nodded.

"Shut up, *jesus*." Billy bucked his hips, and Steve almost fell on top of him again, then rocked forward, his brain barely aware of anything other than the hot tightness around his cock.

"Thought you—thought you wanted to hear about my—my feelblings," Steve panted, sliding his hand down to stroke Billy's dick, and Billy jerked under him. "Since—since you basically proposed earlier." Steve kept his movement slow, feeling his eyes flutter shut.

"...shut the *hell up*," Billy laughed, his voice raw.

"Yeah, okay," Steve tried to summon more words. "Sweet. Stuff."

"Stop fucking lying to me, shut *up*." Billy managed to sound cynical and wrecked at the same time, pushing the pillow off to breathe. He wiped his eyes, leaving his arms over his face.

"I'm not, I'm not, shit—" Steve let himself tip forward a bit, squishing Billy in on himself, to try and see his face.

"Harrington—" he batted Steve's hands away, and Steve grabbed his fingers, twining them with his. Billy sniffled, eyes shut tightly, and Steve swore under his breath.

“Babe. Hargrove. We’re idiots.” He shuffled his knees backwards, breath stuttering at the friction on his dick as he pulled out.

“What the *fuck*—what—*Harrington*—” Billy growled, trying to yank him back, but Steve dropped next to him, panting.

“You get on top. Come—come on, then you aren’t pinned. C’mere.” Steve let himself fall back on his elbows, his dick bouncing ridiculously as he breathed, shining red.

Billy frowned at it, then at him, and huffed a laugh, pushing himself up. He sank down on to Steve’s dick with a soft grunt, his eyes sliding shut, and Steve made himself take a long shaky breath. It was hard to breathe with Billy’s weight astride him—heavy, hot, and *tight*, the melted oil Billy’d been filled with warm between them, then chill as Billy lifted himself to press back down.

It was grinding Steve’s brain to a halt, watching Billy’s abs flex, then his thighs tense to push himself up Steve’s cock. Steve tried to return the favor, but Billy smacked his hand away, watching him intently. “Don’t, I’ll come again.”

His thighs should be okay to touch, Steve hoped, swallowing, and slid his hands up, feeling the muscles flex. He yelped as Billy grabbed his hand, yanking it to his face and biting along the side. Steve curled his fingers, feeling Billy’s tongue work against them, needing something to draw his mind away from putting his other hand on Billy’s dick. It was dripping across his stomach, bouncing with every motion.

They both passed out after. Billy shoved off him, groaning about the heat, and Steve stayed on his back, panting. When his brain started to engage again, he rolled his head to see Billy’s back, then scooted over to spoon him again. “Hey.”

“...hey,” Billy mumbled back.

“Christ, that was,” Steve snorted into the back of Billy’s neck, feeling him snicker, then licked thoughtfully at the salt along the muscles of Billy’s shoulder, around bruises that looked like fingermarks.

“...good?”

“Fucking amazing,” Steve tucked Billy’s hair off the back of his neck, and kissed along it.

Billy snorted, slumping back against him. “You get over...whatever the hell?”

“Eugh,” Steve groaned, leaning his face into Billy’s sweaty hair. “Shit. I just—it’s not—”

“Great,” Billy muttered.

“No, shut up, it’s just—you—your mom’s *awesome*.” Steve swallowed around what felt like shards, and cleared his throat, grimacing. “I just. I’m jealous as hell. Sorry. It’s dumb.”

“...*what*,” Billy laughed against him.

“It’s stupid. She just—she loves you *so much*, and—and I’m not—”

“What,” Billy repeated, before pushing himself up with a groan, rolling his shoulders, and swinging his leg over Steve again. Steve felt his cock twitch, and was hoping Billy hadn’t noticed, as Billy grabbed his face. “Your—your parents suck, right.”

Steve huffed a laugh, trying to look away, but Billy kept firm hold of his jaw.

“They’re shitty,” Billy said, his eyes boring into Steve’s. “—all right, it’s not you. I know I’m not—anything—but—”

Steve jerked back to attention, blinking at Billy’s set expression. “Wait, what?”

“I know I’m not *important*,” Billy hissed, “—shut up, I’m talking—”

“What, no, what the fuck,” Steve grabbed his wrists, and Billy smacked his hands away.

“Get your ass-hands off me.” He put his thumbs over Steve’s mouth, setting his jaw. “Those kids all trust you. They’re all worried as hell,

you know how many shovel talks I've gotten? Dustin was slinging threats while you were drooling on my shoulder—"

"He doesn't even know!"

"...everybody knows, Harrington. I got a shovel talk from *Will*, Harrington. *Will Byers*."

Steve swallowed.

"Your ex is just glad I'm feeding you, I *think*, though when you fucking *stormed out of the library* earlier, she told me she had a *gun*."

Steve snorted, wide-eyed, thinking of Max chanting 'Fight of the exes! Fight! Fight!' in the car. "Uh. Sorry?"

"Your fucking *town sheriff* pulled me over to tell me you're a *good kid* —"

"He said *what?!?*"

"I went into *Radio Shack* and some lady chewed me out, I didn't even get my batteries—"

Steve started giggling in disbelief. "Oh my god, Mrs. Byers, it was—it was Will's mom—"

"Yeah, okay, *Jonathan Byers* had to get a word in too, dipshit, he says if you vouch for me he'll wait and see, but he has *bear traps*—"

Billy started looking a little blurry as Steve cackled, sniffing. A tear slid out the side of his eye, and Billy wiped it away.

"Max is gonna nail my feet to the ground if I so much as stop making you pancakes. And—and they're all good people, right. They matter." He raised his eyebrows, and Steve nodded as much as he could, swallowing hard.

"Y-yeah." He took a shaky breath as Billy sat back, eyes narrowed. The idea that Steve mattered to anyone particularly when he wasn't in the room was something he pushed away to think about later, when he could stare at the ceiling and feel a little shaky, and maybe

bury his face in Billy's sleeping back. Steve yanked him back down. "C'mere, shit."

"Doesn't matter about your shitty parents, they don't know what they've got," Billy informed him, at close range, and Steve took an unsteady breath, and kissed him. The toothpaste had worn off, so he just tasted like Billy, warm, sweaty, and still giving Steve a deep frown.

Steve wiped his eyes with his arm, and grinned up. "And you—" he kissed him again, "—right?"

"Yeah," Billy pushed the kiss deeper, then pulled back, licking his lips. "Yeah, sure. Dig myself the six foot hole. I can hit Nancy up for the gun—"

"No, Jesus," Steve shook his head, leaning up to kiss him again, "—shit. No, not—not—that's stupid, don't shoot yourself to make me *happy*, dumbshit."

"What then," Billy breathed against his mouth, flopping down on top of him. "What can I—" he laughed into another kiss, "—what the hell can I do?"

"You know what you've got, right?"

"You gonna keep making me say this shit?" Billy lowered his eyes, letting go of Steve's face. "I wouldn't leave town, that's for sure."

Steve grinned back at him, a little giddy. "Because you have *feelings* for me."

"Yeah. I do. Screw you." Billy's laugh was uneven, and he rubbed at the marker again.

"You love me back," Steve whispered, leaning up to kiss him again.

"Oh, is that what your feelings are?" Billy snorted.

"What?"

"You feel *something*, great," Billy muttered, rubbing his face, and

rolling off Steve. “You want somebody around that would—I’d—*whatever*, Harrington, *fuck* you, stop laughing at me about this, *jesus*. You don’t—you’re not usually that kinda asshole—” he took a deep breath, and Steve yanked him back down against his side.

“Shit, no, christ. I told you. I *told* you, I said it back, I love you too. I swear.”

“You pinkie-promise? What are you, twelve?” Billy wrinkled his nose, and Steve smacked him with a pillow.

“No, no, no, no—you didn’t—Bi—*Knight*. Knight. I mean it, I—”

“Shut up,” Billy groaned, curling up. Steve curled around him, kissing the back of his reddening neck.

“You, uh, you—it didn’t—you didn’t just—say you loved me. Out of—out of nowhere. Bleah. I, um. I was trying to find the keys—”

“What?!” Billy turned to try and frown over his shoulder, and Steve laughed, leaning to hide his face in Billy’s neck.

“You were so fucking drunk. You—I was piggybacking you out of Carol’s, and I couldn’t find the keys, and so I was trying to—I was going through your bag, and there was this—this sticky—”

“God damn.” Billy was snickering against him. “You shoulda just dumped my drunk ass in the snow—”

“—I put my hand in and there’s this *sticky condom on a banana*—”

“Oh, *jesus christ*—” Billy cackled, tugging Steve’s arm around him tighter, and interlocking their fingers.

“And I was looking at it, and thinking, like, the stuff I’ve done to help you, it’s not—that’s person stuff, you’re a person, you get that help, but—but I don’t—I don’t wanna *lick your freckles* because you’re a person, I don’t get all—bubbled—inside—when you wear my sweatshirts because you’re a *person*, I just lo—I want Trespasser Hargrove to steal my clothes and curl up on me like—”

“*Bubbled*,” Billy repeated, mouth quirked, and Steve kneed him in the

butt, face flaming.

“Shut up, you’re so annoying, Jesus—I’ve got this—gross—banana in my hand, and you *drunk*, hugging my neck, and I just—I thought shit, I’m—I’m in *love* with you, what the hell, I’m not—I’m not even mad, I just—I was so goddamn happy you *called*, I was so—so *fucking worried* about you, and then you were telling me all this drunk stupid bullshit, it was—”

“You are shitting me,” Billy laughed shakily.

“I *told* you, I knew you wouldn’t remember, I was like okay, this is practice, I convince him now, then at championship I hit it out of the park—”

“Basketball is not played in a park.” Billy sounded a little stunned. “The fuck are you even saying—”

“—*so anyway*,” Steve kissed his neck, “—I—I spilled, I didn’t mean to say it with a—a fucking—sticky condom in my hand, okay, sorry—”

“Not sure any of this is happening, honestly,” Billy snorted, swallowing hard.

“—we got in the car, and you wanted to remember, so you were trying to write it down with your busted hand—”

“—sounds like me—”

“—so I wrote it on you.”

“You wrote ‘Steve has feelblings’, right, that makes *perfect* sense—why the hell didn’t I put *that* together, everyone knows what *feelblings* are, Harrington—”

“You yanked your *arm*—” Steve started giggling, squeezing him harder, and Billy shook his head.

“Maybe you just can’t *spell*, your *majesty*—”

“Fuck you. Anyway. That’s—” Steve took a deep breath. “That’s—that’s why. You said. You didn’t just—barf that out there, I did, I—I

was talking all this shit about how much I loved you, and how I could let you know, and you—you, uh, you got kinda pissed off, actually? But you—you did—you said it back.”

Billy took a deep breath, and let it out, then laughed as Steve started uncertainly kissing his shoulder. “...shit, you...*shitbird*, you made it sound like—I thought—” he took a shaky breath, squeezing Steve’s hand tighter, “—I thought I just *spilled my guts* like a fucking—like some—”

“Like me,” Steve snorted, and Billy elbowed him.

He was quiet for a long time, and Steve finally leaned back and pulled him over by the shoulder, so he could frown at the face of his weirdly still home invader. “Did you die?”

“Shut up,” Billy shoved his face away, sitting up. “So that’s it, right, you freaked out ‘cause my mom’s awesome and yours ain’t shit—”

“Shut up, asshole,” Steve snorted, rolling onto his back.

“—and everybody in the goddamn world thinking you’re great isn’t *enough*, I guess, and—and your true *banana-flavored love* was leaving, and—”

“Thanks. My head’s in my ass, okay. Yeah. Sorry.” Steve’s lungs still felt a little splintery, but it was better, listening to Billy rant, still holding his hand. “Don’t go home.” Steve waved their interlocked hands. “You can just—just stay here. For—for as long as, uh—you can stay with me, I like—”

“You’re not *listening*, dipshit, you’ve got, like, a whole family of idiots that wants you happy—”

“Stop, Jesus, I already fucking—*bawled* today, shut up—”

“That what you were doing in your room,” Billy grinned down, “—crying in your pillow ‘cause this little *teeny bitty percentage* of the people you know don’t love you—”

“I was not,” Steve said, with dignity, yelping as Billy shoved him. “I wasn’t! My pillows are down *here*, dickwad—”

Billy burst out laughing. “Crying into your *naked scratchy mattress*—”

“I had towels!” Steve batted him away, *oof-ing* as Billy collapsed across his stomach, gasping with laughter. “And I wasn’t crying! Then!”

“Oh, shit, the library.” Billy propped himself up to see Steve’s face, and Steve forced a laugh. Billy punched his arm, muttering, “You—what the hell, you freak out and run to *Nancy*—”

Steve cupped his fingers over his mouth and nose, breathing deeply. “I was freaked out *about* you, shut up, I’m gonna—I’ll lose my voice, or something, if I keep just—having toddler meltdowns, god *damn* —”

“Is that what it is?” Billy asked dryly. “That what it is when I lose my shit?”

“No! No, you’ve got like—actual problems,” Steve laughed, sniffing.

Billy stared at him. “...like...monsters?”

“You—you see any monsters?” Steve waved a hand. “I don’t see any monsters. Just me, wanting...”

“You’re feeling like a whiny bitch,” Billy assessed, and Steve snickered, nodding, and wiping his eyes, *again*. “I’ll fucking decide when you’re being annoying, *christ*. Just *tell* me. God *damn*. If I do something. Don’t get all—” He waved his hand, and Steve laughed harder. “New fucking rule, *Harrington*,” Billy grabbed Steve’s other wrist, glowering into his face, “—tell me first, and I’ll tell you if it’s dumb, okay.”

“Okay,” Steve rasped, and cleared his throat.

“Repeat after me, ‘if I want a fucking boyfriend so bad I better talk to him’.” Billy narrowed his eyes, and Steve nodded, dissolving into sniggers again. “Say it,” Billy shook him by the arms, and Steve nodded, crying and laughing too hard to answer. “Shit.” Billy pushed himself upright, dragging Steve along, “—c’mon, shower, I’ll shampoo your damn hair.”

Steve grabbed him from behind, wrapping his legs around Billy's waist, and Billy carried him upstairs. "If anything happens to you, your mom will murder me," Steve whispered, and Billy huffed a laugh. "So. Stay here. Maybe he'll—maybe—we can talk to Hopper. Just—just stay here."

After a pause lasting clear up the stairs, Billy sighed, and nodded.

Steve hugged his head.

The next day in ceramics class, Steve had staked out a table to himself, and stuck headphones on with something not too scream-y of Billy's. He was planning to start a new, hopefully less hideous project, when Max and Lucas walked in, followed by El dragging Billy, and then *Nancy* edging her way in—after a wary glance around for the teacher, who had her feet up in the office. Steve was squinting at *that* procession when Dustin thumped against his back, chin abruptly digging into his shoulder. Steve nearly stabbed him in the eye with a clay scooping tool, and yanked his headphones down. "Christ. Don't just *grab* people, rugrat."

"Eleven's bringing Billy to see your *present*," Dustin whined. "Why didn't I get a present?! I'm your *best* friend, Steve! He's just your *embarrassing secret sex friend*."

"Oh my god." Steve dropped his head into his hands as Nancy dropped into the seat across from him.

"What is going on," she whispered.

"A Shriner's convention," Dustin whispered back, beaming. "We're all here to see the *present* Steve made for *Billy*."

"Oh no." Steve stared over at El, dragging Billy determinedly around.

"Did he ever give *you* a handmade present?" Dustin demanded of Nancy, who shook her head, eyebrows raised.

"Shit," Steve waved his hands at her, "—no, it's not—it's—um—"

"We see how it is," Dustin harrumphed.

"What the hell do you *want*," Max stage-whispered at Billy—more and more of Steve's class were paying attention, out of the corners of their eyes—and Billy hissed back "I didn't want anything *here*, I don't know what's—"

After a bit of glaring at each other, Max sighed loudly, grabbed his arm, and drug him out the side door, and El came over to the table with Steve's horrible, mustard yellow-gleaming, *lumpy* coil-built clay monstrosity.

"Wow," Dustin stared, "—y'know what, he's welcome to it."

"You're perfect for each other," Nancy agreed, obviously trying not to laugh, and Steve felt himself flushing.

"It's a *joke*," he hissed. "It's a *stupid hilarious joke present*—"

"Yeah," Dustin grimaced. "It's, ugh."

"It looks like a piece of shit," Lucas put in, having wandered over, his eyes on the side door, where they could see Max waving her arms at Billy through the glass panel. He followed her around, and then they were talking, intently.

After a few minutes she stormed back in, wiping her eyes, and Eleven and Lucas ran over. Steve caught the words "life insurance" in their fierce whispers, and locked eyes with Billy, who shrugged, jaw set. Eleven turned to frown at him, then at Steve, and took a deep breath, setting her shoulders. She put an arm around Max, and Steve started to stand up, thinking he better talk to Eleven before she skewered Neil Hargrove on a handy treetop like a psychic shrike, not because *Neil Hargrove* didn't deserve *worse*, but to save Hopper trying to derail a really newsworthy murder investigation.

"...is that thing my present," Billy asked, rubbing his red eyes.

"It *is*, aren't you *lucky*." Dustin shoved it across the table, and Billy grabbed for it, but missed. There was a definite *crashing* sound on the floor.

“Oh shit, I’m sorry! Shit!” Dustin scrambled up and ran around to help Billy gather the mostly-whole hideous thing and the couple chunks of coil that had cracked off the bottom corner.

“Oh no, it’s broken,” Steve rolled his eyes, “—I guess it goes straight in the trash—”

“Oh no, did it break?!” Eleven ran over, dragging Max.

“No, it’s okay,” Dustin pressed it back together, “—we can glue it, it’ll be fine—”

“Wow, it’ll be *even uglier*—” Steve snorted.

“It’s got ‘H + H’ in a *heart* on the bottom.” Billy grinned over, looking delighted—both at the thought, and Steve’s humiliation, Steve was sure—and Steve groaned.

“I will find glue.” Eleven trotted over to bang on the teacher’s open door, and Steve was glad most of the class was listening to headphones, or skipping class.

“You could use hot glue,” Lucas suggested. “Not like it was gonna hold water anyway.”

Dustin drug Billy and the broken piece of shit off to the teacher.

“What is happening,” Steve moaned, to Nancy, and she grinned at him. “Don’t touch that thing,” he warned her, “I think Tommy rubbed his dick on it, or something, he was being really loud over there.”

Eleven, trailing Lucas and Max, drug Billy back with a surprisingly speedily-fixed clay horror, now sitting unevenly and bulging with greyish hot glue. “What?” Billy asked, cradling the thing.

“...nothing,” Steve stared at it, then at Nancy, who bit her lips, “—I’ll tell you in, like, thirty years.”

Billy almost dropped it again, shooting him a wide-eyed glance, and cleared his throat. “That’s—that’s a long time, Harrington.”

Steve felt his face flush, and stared back at Billy, eyes wide.

"I've got googly eyes," Dustin suggested. "We could cover up the glue—"

"Give 'em here," Billy nodded, and Dustin whipped out a bag of multi-sized googly eyes. They sat shoulder to shoulder, and the kids leaned around Billy's chair.

"Put some big ones on the front," Max suggested, sniffing, and Lucas snorted.

"Which even is the front?"

Max was trying to wipe her eyes with her shoulders, and Steve realized she was leaning against Billy's chair, Eleven holding her hand on one side, jaw firm, while Lucas had the other. Billy looked up and mouthed something, and Max huffed a laugh, her shoulders relaxing a little. She knelt his chair, and he grinned a little at his awful present.

Dustin was sticking on a line of little eyes along the crack, and Nancy leaned in to prod at the pile of googly eyes, then stopped to dig around in her purse. "If you use a couple of those big ones, I've got some fake eyelashes."

"Oh my god," Billy laughed harder, leaning his head in his hand.

"It'll be just horrible when I accidentally knock it on the floor," Steve kicked his leg, "—what a tragedy—"

"I'll tell everyone you're a murderer," Billy hissed back. "I'll call Hopper and tell him you killed her—"

"Denise—" Dustin put in, cackling.

"Everyone will know of your crime against *Denise, Harrington*—"

"I put her *on* this earth," Steve snickered, "—I can take her off—"

"Why's your boyfriend so happy about that awful thing," Dustin whispered, while Billy, Eleven, and Nancy tried to get the fake lashes

on. “It looks like Jabba the Hutt. Or Slimer. Or Jabba the Hutt had sex with Slimer—”

“He’s just laughing at my art skills,” Steve rolled his eyes. “I can do *better* than that,” he said, louder, pointing at Denise, and Billy raised his eyebrows.

“You *sure*?” Max snorted.

“Fuck yeah I’m *sure*, that was a *joke*—”

“Big words, Harrington,” Lucas said, as Billy held Denise up, shaking her a bit so the eyes would waggle from side to side. “You sure you can back that up?”

Max cocked her head. “Yeah, we’ve got big expectations now.”

“It’s almost Valentine’s Day,” Nancy pointed out, and Steve resisted the urge to stick his tongue out at her.

“I’ll make an *awesome* present, okay—”

“Okay...” Billy grinned at Denise, eyes flicking to Steve’s, and Max kicked his chair again, smiling crookedly.

Notes for the Chapter:

Billy uses a homophobic slur talking about himself, but is convincingly reassured, and I did my research on the lube! It's what's recommended by several sex sites if you don't have lube! XD I would NOT say this chapter contains infidelity, because Billy and Steve don't think that's what happened--they haven't even admitted they're dating yet, so they can't be unfaithful. But Billy does get super drunk and have sex with somebody who isn't Steve, which leads to Steve realizing he wants Billy all to himself.

"Marcenia Lyle (Toni "Tomboy") Alberga/Stone", the

cat's namesake, broke both gender and racial barriers by becoming the first female professional baseball player in the Negro Major League. She went on to become a respected coach. Tomika has ambitions. XD

Thank you so much for wandering in! Lemme know if you liked my story--I lovelovelove hearing from people! Kudos! Short comments! Long comments! Questions! Constructive criticism! Comments as extra kudos! Thanks so, so much! XD

(I try to reply to each one, but if you don't want a response to your comment then please say "No reply please" or "Whisper" so I'll know not to reply.)

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11. Friends don't lie

Summary for the Chapter:

Steve's getting better at having friends, Billy's getting better at reading Steve, and Robin regrets everything.

Notes for the Chapter:

Happy Halloween! It's been forever! In my defense, I wrote a lot of other things while I figured this one out.

Last chapter: Steve gave Billy a ceramic monstrosity, Dustin broke it and then covered it in googly eyes, and it has been christened Denise. Billy talked to his mom, and learned his mom was afraid of Neil. He passed that info on to Max.

The next chapter is already almost as long as this one...but there's still a lot to rewrite. Hopefully it'll only be a couple weeks, though! Finishing this is my Nanowrimo project! XD

After the accidentally-romantic reveal of Steve's ceramic monstrosity, Billy was distracted in gym, until Steve leaned in to whisper "Can't believe you're ignoring my balls, Hargrove."

"Believe me, I'm not," Billy muttered back, his jaw working. He stumbled back into their gym teacher, his eyes fixed on Steve's mouth, and Steve grinned at him, and licked his lips.

The next time they passed each other, Steve leaned to whisper "What kinda attention am I gonna get for a *good* present, Hargrove?"

"I dunno, I haven't seen one yet," Billy hissed back, and then, "Don't diss Denise, asshole. I'll pound your ass into—*jesus christ*," he choked out, his neck flushed, and he spun on his heel and stomped off directly through the melee around the basketball hoop, elbowing

his way to the locker rooms. By the time Steve got there, Billy was showered and clothed, leaning to talk to Tommy as Steve ducked into the showers.

When he got out, Billy was lying on his back on the bench, eyeing the water running down Steve's legs, and Steve wanted to kiss him. He firmed his lips and determination, and decided to stay after school to work on a better Valentine's Day present—Denise had been a *joke*, he ranted in his head, he could do better if he was *trying*—

Steve told Eleven this, when she popped up at his elbow in the locker room—right after he shrieked, scrambling for a towel. She surveyed the locker room with narrowed eyes, and more of the highschool boys screamed than would admit to it later, covering their dicks. As most of the class dove behind lockers, she allowed Steve to fling Billy's towel over her head and shove her back towards the door. "So...if you're busy after school, we can borrow Billy, right?" she asked, through the towel.

Billy was laughing his ass off, since he'd had *pants* on already, and his junk wasn't vulnerable to the critical eye of a middle-school girl. "No cats," he called over.

"You can keep him," Steve muttered, shoving her out the door. When he stalked back in, Billy grinned at him, pointedly rubbing his thumb along his own inner elbow, where Steve had drawn the Sharpie heart with the messy H + H.

Steve felt his cheeks heat. "Shut up."

"Be honest about your *feebings*, Harrington," Billy whispered back, staggering as Steve thudded their shoulders together while he yanked his jeans up over his briefs.

"*Here?! I think we'd get expelled,*" Steve whispered back, and Billy licked his lips, snickering.

"I'm your favorite," Billy breathed in his ear, and Steve swiveled to face his locker, eyes wide as he popped a boner. *Not now*, he told his dick, straining against his pants, *later, just wait until after school, I'll get my fingers in his hair and pull him close, and when his knees start to*

get noodly with my mouth on his neck, we can fuck on the kitchen floor—

“Harrington,” Billy repeated, elbowing him, and Steve cleared his throat, rubbing his face. His cheeks were hot.

“Yeah, yes, I’m here,” he swallowed, “—here, right here.”

Billy squinted at him, halfway into a sweatshirt, so his biceps flexed against the fabric, and his chest and abs gleamed in the florescent lights of the locker room. He zipped it up. “...you sure?”

“Very very here, at school,” Steve muttered, staring into his locker again. “Very here where I can’t, uh. What?”

“You like me as much as Tommy, right,” Billy cocked his head, leaning in to murmur, “—what if I hit him, you gonna throw me out, or—”

“Wait, what?” Steve kept his eyes on Billy’s *face*, listening, instead of tracking the trickle of water from his wet hair down his neck and along his collarbone. “What’s going on?”

“He’s, uh,” Billy leaned back against the lockers, surveying the room with a too-wide grin. “—he’s thinking one of us is gonna spread it around I—I let him—we screwed, y’know. Says he’s not *like me*, he’s—he says he’s gonna tell everyone I’m a fag, that’s why I’m sniffing around Steve Harrington—”

“Christ.”

“I’m gonna feed him his own molars.” Billy rolled his shoulders. “Before he gets me drug behind some redneck meathead’s truck—”

“Holy shit,” Steve breathed, wanting to spin his bat around his hand. He took a deep breath. “Okay, okay,” he whispered. “Okay, we can’t—we can’t kill him, we—we can’t murder him, Hargrove, we *can’t*. We can’t—we can’t just—just *murder him*, even if—”

“Jesus,” Billy whispered, glancing around. “Ssh!”

“We—we’d probably get caught,” Steve told Billy, grabbing his hands and squeezing them. “We’d—we’d get caught, mustard, uh, mustard

pie, we'd—we'd definitely go to jail, we can't kill him."

"I didn't say *murder*," Billy hissed back, wide-eyed. "I said I was gonna *punch his face*, Harrington—"

"Okay," Steve nodded, squeezing Billy's hands so hard he winced.

"Okay. Okay, god *damn* it. Damn, damn, damn *damn* it—"

"Holy *fucking helicopters*, the hell is the *matter* with you," Billy muttered, straight-faced, and Steve choked on a snort, and started coughing.

"Oh my god I love you," he groaned into his hand, ignoring Billy suddenly closer, warm against his side. "Okay. Okay, wait, no." Steve yanked his shirt on, got some of it in his mouth, and Billy yanked it down, leaning in.

Billy slid his hand up Steve's side, hot and callused, and Steve shoved it down and away, trying to refocus his brain on Billy's *words*. "I need to do something," Billy hissed. "He's gonna tell everybody I'm *queer*, your *majesty*." His eyes were red. "You don't need to—none of that shit's gonna get on you—"

"No, jussec." Steve set his shoulders, did a mental check of his anatomy, and decided he could turn around without everybody knowing he got hard when Billy Hargrove growled in his ear. "It's—just—just a—just hold off, okay. I'll—I won't kill him. I'll talk to him."

"Talk to him?! *Harrington*," Billy growled, grabbing his wrist, and Steve held still, feeling his bones grind together. They were starting to draw attention, so he asked the guy across the bench about his new shoes, and found out way more about Adidas Micropacers than he'd ever wanted to know, but the conversation kept going when he backed out. Billy let go of his wrist, but leaned close. "Your *majesty*. Whaddaya mean *talk to him*, talk to *me*, come *on*," he said under his breath.

"I'll *handle* it," Steve whispered back, nodding and grinning at another kid showing off his sneakers. He watched Tommy fixing his hair, and tried to remember his past friend's class schedule.

“Just a little worried about getting *lynched*, probably by the people in *this room*,” Billy hissed, as Steve started to walk away.

Steve bit his lips, turning back to pretend to check inside his locker. “Look. Dickhead,” he tried, and Billy covered a snort, swallowing. Steve tried to grin confidently. “Trespasser. *Wait* a sec, just—just wait a minute, let me—let me try something. We can’t kill him,” Steve sighed, and Billy’s jaw clenched.

“I wasn’t *trying* to kill him,” he hissed back.

“You beat him up, he’ll just get mad! Besides, you start throwing punches, they’ll call your dad—get him down here—”

Billy shrugged. His hands shook, and he clenched them in fists, laughing. “Win some, lose some—at least you won’t go to *jail*, Jesus H. Christ—”

“No, no—I—I, uh, you won’t, uh, he won’t, okay, babe, Ha-Hargrove, just—just gimme a *minute*, I—I’m not—if this doesn’t work we—I—I’ll hold him down. We’ll just kill him. You can—you can use my bat.”

Billy snorted, side-eyeing him. “...good use for it.” He rubbed his face, and nodded, tilting back to lean against the lockers. His knuckles were white on his forearms again, his nails digging into the sleeves of Steve’s sweatshirt against the hearts Steve had drawn up his arm. “As you fucking command, my leige. I hope your plan’s better than ‘murder’.”

Steve rolled his eyes, and jogged out of the locker room after Tommy, dropping an arm around his shoulders.

“Hey there,” Tommy grinned at him, his gaze dropping to Steve’s mouth and back up in a way Steve remembered, but hadn’t really registered before.

Steve smiled—it was easier to smile around Tommy than it was to remember what Tommy was *like*, and always had been—and tried to decide how to start.

“Hargrove get all shook up and remember who your *real* friends

are?” Tommy elbowed Steve, then hailed Carol out of the crowd.

“He’s a friend,” Steve tried.

“Bet he didn’t tell you about the other night,” Tommy glanced up sideways, his jaw clenched, “—when we tried to get you to party.”

“He doesn’t remember most of it,” Steve blurted, and his stomach sank at Tommy’s widening grin. “Look, I know what happened, and, uh—”

“I bet you don’t,” Tommy hissed, glancing around. Carol came out of her class, but saw them and leaned against the wall, disentangling an earring from her hair. Tommy jerked away from Steve to walk backwards towards her. “Bet he didn’t tell you who he wanted to *fuck*.”

“He—he said—”

“Hate to break it to you,” Tommy’s voice rose, “—Billy Hargrove wants y—”

“I still talk to Carol’s sister,” Steve hissed at him. “Remember? She had a story about a party you guys left. When I was visiting my mom in Boston.”

“What?” Tommy stopped in the middle of the hallway, staring at him.

“Remember finding the keys in a backhoe? And a *joyride*?” Steve narrowed his eyes, as Tommy snorted a laugh. Steve lowered his voice. “—I *know* what happened with Billy, okay—”

Tommy’s freckles stood out as he paled. “No, you—you wouldn’t be—he lied,” he laughed shakily. “He must’ve, he’s a *fucking liar*— ”

“What?! He—he didn’t have to,” Steve raised his eyebrows, “—he *called* me, I picked him up. I was in there while you assholes were in the shower—”

Tommy’s breath caught, and his eyes got shiny, and Steve *knew* that look—from Billy smashing a plate in his face at the Byers’, but also

from years of knowing *Tommy*, and he waved his hands, open palmed.

"I don't care! I don't care, I don't care, but don't—don't try and—don't say it was all Hargrove's fault, it wasn't—"

"You don't...care," Tommy took a deep breath, shoulders relaxing, then punched Steve's arm. "The fuck do you mean, you *don't care*, you moron, you still don't get what I—why the hell did he call *you*, didn't he kick your ass? You his *bitch* now?" he hissed, and Steve bit his lips.

"Yeah. No, I'm not—" Steve felt his cheeks warming, and cleared his throat. "He—he did that," Steve kept nodding, running his fingers through his hair, "—he did, he beat me up. Yeah. So did *you*, asswipe. But. Um, if—if you try and—and tell everyone he—that he's—"

"He's a goddamn—"

Steve cut him off, clenching his fists. "If you tell people he did something to—to you, if you—if you say it's—if you say it was *all Billy*, I—I won't keep your secrets. Anymore."

"...what," Tommy choked.

"Any of them," Steve emphasized, flailing his hands. "I know some shit. They try you now, you might get tried as an adult. You could go to *actual prison*, dude."

"I will *end* you," Tommy hissed, sputtering with rage, "I will *end* you and your fag friend—you—"

Steve flinched, but held his ground. "Bullshit. I won't—I won't say anything unless you...do," he frowned, thinking through it, "—but...I think—I think between you, and Hargrove, and me," he swallowed, "—I think—I think I'm who people will listen to here at school. If you—if you try to tell them. That. And—and you know Sheriff Hopper will hear me out, when I tell him who took the *backhoe*. Took it for a *spin* when they were putting in the new parking lot. You crashed the backhoe into the sheriff station that night,

remember? I can't—don't quite remember how many *thousands* of dollars in damage that was, d'you?"

Tommy stepped closer, laughing. "And what, you're gonna sell me out for the *queer*? Shouldn't you be thinking about what *I* could do...Pussington?" Tommy growled, and Steve blinked at him, then snorted a laugh.

"I've fought scarier shit than you, Tommy Hagen," he hissed. "I could walk over and use the pay phone right now. Call the police here. Don't drop the soap when you get sent to *prison*, right? Because *Billy's* the one who's queer."

"God, you're dumb," Tommy sneered, but he was staring at Steve's face, wet-eyed. "You don't even make sense. I can just see you on the witness stand."

"Oh, you want me to do it?" Steve asked, setting his shoulders to turn away.

Tommy yelled "Fuck you, no!", and Steve turned back to see him glaring, fists clenched. "I'll leave your *boyfriend* alone," he hissed.

Steve nodded, his jaw hurting as his teeth ground together, and he shoved by, walking as fast as he could back to the locker room.

Billy was still there, lying along a bench, and Steve wished everyone else had left, so he could crawl up between Billy's knees, and flop on his chest. He kicked out and nudged Billy's shoulder, instead. "You ready yet?"

"You gonna hold him down for me to punch?" Billy asked, without opening his eyes.

"No, I, uh." Steve crouched down to whisper, hugging his knees. "I told him I know *way* too much shit about him for him to go mouthing off."

"...you *blackmailed* him?!" Billy turned his head to stare over.

"Noooo," Steve considered, "—yeah? I guess?"

"Is anybody looking?" Billy whispered back.

Steve frowned around, then shook his head, and Billy grabbed him by the nape of his neck and yanked him down into a deep, soft kiss. Steve flailed his hands, teetering on the balls of his feet, then dropped to a kneel, and slid his thumb along Billy's cheek.

Billy pulled back, licking his lips, and sat up. "Shit," he rolled his shoulders, "I can't really owe you more...everything."

"...you don't owe me anything," Steve huffed a laugh, grimacing at a sudden memory of the way the world had wobbled around him, after days awake. How he'd heard Billy's yelling from outside while he was lying on the floor of the shower, hoping the hot water would bake him to sleep. "My—my brain's busted too. You..." he laughed, shaking his head.

"I what?" Billy kept his voice low, but they were drowned out anyway by some guys in the other corner having a pushup contest.

Steve cleared his throat, feeling the edges of the tile dig into his knees, and breathing in the stale smell of gym clothes, and towels that never quite dried. "You saved me. Too. I couldn't—"

"How the *hell*—"

"I can't sleep," Steve snorted, shrugging, and keeping his eyes on the floor. "And then you showed up. Couldn't—I wasn't—eating, a lot, just because I couldn't—I was so goddamn tired. I don't know, it..."

Billy was quiet for a long few seconds, but when Steve risked a glance up, he had that expressionless face he got when something reminded him of his dad.

"Sorry—sorry, I'm—"

Billy shoved him, and Steve caught himself against a locker, laughing, and a little off-balance. Billy crossed his arms. "You're not *being dumb*, if that's what you're gonna say."

"Just making us miss lunch," Steve tried, feeling something relax between his shoulders. He brushed himself off, getting to his feet,

and let Billy drag him down to sit on the bench. Billy mouthed up under Steve's ear, kissing open-mouthed up his neck. "Hope nobody's looking," Steve told him, leaning into it.

"They're all being morons behind like five rows of lockers," Billy whispered back, sliding an arm around Steve's shoulders, and grabbing at Steve's jeans with the other. "Lemme cheer you up," he breathed against Steve's jaw, biting along it, and Steve nearly choked on his own spit as Billy yanked his fly open and reached into his briefs, releasing the pressure on Steve's suddenly shatteringly hard cock, and sliding a callused thumb over the wet slit in the tip. "They're going to lunch," Billy whispered. "No reason they'd come over here."

"Christ," Steve muttered, muffling his gasps against Billy's sweatshirted shoulder, and clenching his fingers in the fabric. "Le-let me get you—" he whispered, sliding his hand down Billy's stomach.

"Not the one crying in the locker room, *Stevie*," Billy laughed, pushing the tight circle of his thumb and forefinger over Steve's dick. Steve rolled his head against Billy's shoulder, trying not to make a noise, and squirmed closer, his brain whitening out things like reciprocation, or witnesses, or *dignity*, as he faintly registered his own voice *begging* when Billy took his hand away for a second, returning it wetter. "Go ahead, they left," Billy whispered in his ear, squeezing him closer until Steve was half in his lap.

"Prettiest trespasser," Steve realized he was mumbling, along with even more nonsensical things like "—pie, sweet—sweet pie, mustard asshole pie—", "fuck, fuck, fuck," and, when Billy pulled away to lick his hand again, in an attempt to be more complimentary, "—nighty—knightliest nighty knight—"—but Billy's hand was firm and a little rough against his hot skin, and Billy's shoulders were shaking with laughter, so Steve didn't care. He went still with a grunt, breathing smoke, cologne, and *Billy*, and just lay there, feeling sweat trickle down the back of his neck.

"There is so much wrong with you," Billy muttered against his temple. "Knighty-knight? *Seriously?*"

"My hero," Steve mumbled, opening one eye to assess the damage.

Billy'd caught the mess in a paper towel. "...you planned that," he realized, laughing.

"Malice aforethought," Billy said, and Steve blinked muzzily. "Premeditation. First degree handjobbing. That'd just get me expelled, though, probably, your dirty talk's gonna get you *shot*."

"Mmm," Steve hummed. "He called me 'Pussington,' he muttered. "Tommy. Sounds like 'Puss in Boots' more than—"

Billy cackled against his neck, then pulled him closer, and Steve felt his face heat. He let himself take a deep breath, curling a little against Billy, and Billy waited, and didn't mention the time, or their stomachs growling.

After what seemed like hours, but not long enough, Steve pulled away, clenching his fingers on the bench and laughing. "Shit," he said, looking at the lockers to avoid looking at Billy, after clinging to him like a koala. His breathing was even, which was a relief, even if he felt a little...shaky, threatening his oldest friend with jail. *Because I've got so many*, he thought, laughing again, and Billy leaned forward to frown into his face.

"Harrington," he whispered. "D'I break you?"

Steve started giggling, and couldn't stop.

Billy hung around, hunched in Steve's sweatshirt, for the rest of the day. He was leaning across from Steve's locker after third period, but vanished when Steve turned around. He was at the drinking fountain outside the open door of geometry, and Steve missed half the lesson, watching him bend over the faucet, and watching the stream of water fill his mouth and run off his chin.

Just when Steve thought he was free, in Typing 1, he glanced out the window and realized Billy Hargrove was sunning himself outside along the top of Steve's parent's BMW, sweatshirt unbuttoned, his tanning-bed-tan shining as his hair ruffled in the breeze.

Steve muffled his laughter, squeezing his thighs together as his dick

woke up *again*. “Go back to sleep,” he growled at it, under his breath. Nancy shot him a glance, then looked out the window, and choked on a snort.

“What’s he *doing*?” she whispered, her elbow brushing his as she clacked away at the electric typewriter.

Being beautiful, Steve didn’t say. “Messing with me,” he muttered, which was equally true. “He hasn’t left me alone since El showed him, uh,” he squinted, trying to remember. “Nadine?”

“Denise!” Nancy muffled another snort, snickering. “Oh, lord, Steve, it’s so hideous.”

“He likes it!” Steve hissed back, feeling his cheeks heat. “He has awful taste!”

“He doesn’t,” she said, shooting a grin over, and his lungs clenched at the fondness in it even as she hissed, “Keep typing, why don’t you.”

He set his jaw, and pounded out *All work and no play makes Steve a dull boy*, one-fingered. “How’s *Jonathan*,” he asked petulantly.

“Oh, Steve,” she sighed. “Now you’ve got, uh, Billy, I can’t—listen, this goes *no farther*,” she angled her body towards him, dropping her voice to nearly inaudible.

“What?!” he whispered back, and she glanced around, holding her finger over her mouth.

“Ssh! Steve, I can’t *tell* anyone—things. I would have told *Barb*—”

Steve nodded, wincing.

She covered her mouth, looking around the extremely loud typing class. Her voice was nearly drowned out by the clacking keys, and Steve leaned closer. “Steve, when he’s about to come, he looks like he’s going to *sneeze*. He makes all these *faces*, Steve—”

Steve whooped with laughter, tears springing to his eyes, and nearly fell out of his seat as Nancy smacked his arm and shoulder, giggling herself.

“Shut up, shut up!” she hissed. “Don’t tell anyone!”

“I—I won’t,” he gasped, wiping his eyes. “Jesus. Who the hell would I even—”

“Like *Tommy*?” she hissed, raising her eyebrows, and he cleared his throat.

“Actually,” he said, tearing out the page he’d ruined, and typing away at his assignment with two fingers, “—Tommy, uh, he said he’d. Um, d’you remember when somebody took a joyride on the backhoe at the sheriff’s station?”

She snorted, glancing over. “...everybody remembers that, they had to redo half the road.”

“Yeah, uh, Tommy kinda...found out about Billy, he said he’d tell, just, *everyone*—”

“Found out Billy *what*?!” Nancy stared at the side of his head. “That he beat you up, or—?”

“Everybody keeps saying that, I got some hits in—” he grumbled, feeling his face heat.

“Wait, what? He found out about—” she lowered her voice to a hiss, glancing around, “—found out about *you and Billy*?”

Steve opened his mouth, and just breathed, then bit his lips. He couldn’t...quite...tell Nancy about Billy’s wild King Kong banana orgy, after what had happened in the locker room—and he wasn’t sure whether the sudden urge to hit something was directed at Tommy, for the bruises he’d left, or Billy, for getting *bored* and supplementing his sex-diet with jungle fruit, or the world at large, for making him keep a secret for somebody as awful as Tommy Hagen. “Uh, about—about, um, Billy. He—I, uh, I think he was kinda...drunk, and he’s—he’s—”

“He’s *what*, Steve?!” she whispered back, wide-eyed.

“He’s *kind of gay*,” Steve hissed back, through gritted teeth. “He was *kinda gay* at *Tommy Hagen*.”

"Oh my god, Steve," she dropped her voice even lower, and reached over to squeeze his wrist. "He has to be *careful*."

"He said he'd tell everyone—Tommy said," Steve tried to explain, feeling like he was picking his way across a trapped floor, as he tried to avoid saying what Billy'd actually done. Tiptoeing across the temple tiles like Indiana Jones, doing his best to keep the world from falling away around him. *Not that Nancy'd say anything*, he thought, but he remembered Billy's shaking hands. *I gotta get used to remembering what are my secrets to tell*, he reminded himself, his new mantra. *My secrets vs. Billy's secrets vs. Will's secrets vs. Jonathan's dumb sex face*. "I, uh," he said, shaking his head to clear it of awful imagery, "—I told him I'd tell Hopper it was him. Tommy. Joyriding in the backhoe. He spills about Billy, he'll have to pay for all that. He's not gonna—I won't be telling him...things. Tommy."

"That's..." Nancy trailed off, and he narrowed his eyes at her, suspecting she was trying not to say "wonderful news".

"I *know*, Jesus," he hissed at her, whacking at the typewriter keys with more force. "He's bullshit, I get it, we were *both* bullsh—"

"No! No, uh," she bit her lips, thumping her stack of typed pages to straighten them. "That's not—I didn't mean that! It's just, I mean. Yeah, he probably wasn't a great friend. But now we *both* lost our *best friends*—" she flailed her arms, and he ducked, "—in this *whole* mess of bullshit. It—it *sucks balls*."

He grinned at her, and she set her jaw.

"It's not funny, Steve. And—and don't—don't tell *Dustin*. Or *Billy*," she narrowed her eyes. "You better not tell anyone! Jonathan's never dated before, I'll—it's not his *fault*, Steve, he's *trying*—" "

"How could you make me keep this secret," he leaned his face in his hand, shoulders shaking with snickers.

"I had to tell *someone*," she hissed. "He *closes one eye*, Steve! I can't —"

Steve nearly fell out of his seat laughing, and she elbowed him over

and over until he started to feel bruised.

“Shut up,” she muttered, wiping her own eyes as she tried to stop giggling. “Jesus.”

“Holy crap, what have you told him about *me*,” Steve hissed back, still laughing, but shuddering a little at the thought.

“Nothing! I’m *dating* him, I’m not going to *compare and contrast*, Steve, *god*. But—but you’ve—you’re—” she narrowed her eyes through the window at Billy, who’d finally huddled against the cold and zipped up the sweatshirt. “—you—”

“We’re—we’re friends. Uh. Just friends, now,” he supplied, the words feeling odd, and a little sad in his mouth. She hummed, frowning at her typewriter, and he glanced at Billy, thinking he might not have ever gotten to know him, if Nancy hadn’t lost her shit after he drug her out to that party. It was a weird thought, and Steve stared out the window, thinking of his house empty of Billy’s shoes, beer cans, lingering cigarette smoke, and the warm weight pressed against his back when he least expected it. No more slow kisses up his neck when he was stuck in his own head.

Nancy nudged him, and he pulled himself back from watching Billy tug at his earring.

“I meant, uh, we—me and you, we *get* to be friends now,” he tried, and she bit back a smile. “We can talk about *boys* now,” he pushed further, wrinkling his nose. “If...if you want? I, uh. I think I might be better at picking boyfriends than being one.”

“Maybe you needed the practise run,” Nancy followed his gaze so both of them were watching Billy, who’d given up on pin-up poses, and was trying to keep his textbook, binder, and pile of flashcards from blowing around in the January wind. “I think...I think maybe we *both* needed the practise run. But—I have to tell someone besides Barb, you know?”

“Yeah. Wait. What?” he turned his frown back to her.

She took a shaky sigh, digging into her backpack, and tossed a

sandwich baggie of goldfish crackers on the desk between them. Steve inched his hand towards them, watching her hunched shoulders and tight jaw as she pulled out a composition book. She held it, white-knuckled, for a long second, then shoved it at him.

Steve accepted it—after digging for a handful of goldfish crackers—and opened the first page, propping it on his knee. In capital letters, it just said “I MISS YOU”.

“I—I sort of—tell Barb everything,” Nancy bit her lips, taking a slow breath through her nose. Her eyes shone. “It’s—it’s like this huge *letter* about everything I couldn’t—after she—there’s so *much* I want to tell her, Steve, so much has *happened*—”

“Uh,” he stared at it, reluctant to turn the page, and Nancy grabbed it back.

“Shut up,” she muttered. “I know it’s dumb.”

“N-no,” he blurted. “No, it’s not, it’s not dumb.” He wondered whether he should remind her about their typing assignment, but hers looked finished. *I can finish mine later*, he promised himself. “Uh, sorry I—it’s not dumb, I just don’t—when you’re sad I just—I don’t know what to—how can I, uh—”

She laughed, swallowing, and closed her eyes. “I—I thought I’d just—fill this. Write until I use all the pages, and the—and the margins, and the inside covers—” she made a soft, horrible gulping sound, and Steve’s nails dug into his palms with the urge to *grab* her, like he would have if they’d still been dating, and squeeze her thin shoulders. “I—I thought maybe I’d—feel better. Once—Once I say. Everything. Tell her everything. And then bury it. I—we—there wasn’t a body, I couldn’t bring her *back to bury*—I couldn’t even say what I wanted at her funeral—I can bury my *bullshit letter instead*—”

“We can do that,” he said quickly, glad the typewriters were loud enough to drown them out. “We—we can say, uh, we can say—say things, write her letters? Find—find a nice spot? Bury, um, bury things, letters?”

“She didn’t have any other friends,” Nancy stared ahead, her eyes

shining.

"I can write her a letter," were the words that fell out of his mouth, like he could even remember more of Barbra Holland than a vague shape at Nancy's elbow. "I can—I can thank her for being a good friend, anyway. To, um, you. To my friend Nancy?"

"Sh-she—she really was," Nancy's shoulders shook with a sob, and for the first and probably the last time, Steve wished Jonathan Byers was around to do—*something*, whatever it was he did that made Nancy less *sad*. Maybe it was worth the awful sex.

In the heat of the moment, Steve felt he'd easily trade his skill at orgasms with whatever made Nancy *stop*—stop looking so pinched around the eyes, and start teasing him again over Billy Hargrove.

She took a shaky breath, pressing her face to the back of her hand. "I—I was—I was nervous coming to your house, the—that night, the night she—in your—in your pool—to *the party*, your *party*, and she wanted to have my back, so she came *with* me, even though—even though she *hated parties*—"

If Jonathan Byers couldn't show up, Steve wished Billy *would*, remembering him explaining things to Will and El in IHOP, until Will relaxed, and smiled, and got brave enough to ask questions. "I—I'll have your back," Steve tried. "Now. I *will*. Um, she, uh, we can thank her for having your back. We can—"

He tried to remember what people did at funerals—other than wear scratchy suits—as Nancy nodded, rubbing her eyes with her fingers, then rubbing her wet face with her wrists. He clenched his fingers harder in his jeans. "Uh, flowers? We can—I'll get flowers, did she have a favorite song? I have a boombox. I have batteries for it, I can get batteries for it—um, Billy, Billy will have a good idea," he trailed off, trying to think what it could be, with Billy outside, instead of by Steve's elbow where he belonged. "He'll have a good idea, he'll—he always has a good idea—"

Nancy snorted, smiling at him, but her eyes were red. Her voice was high and shaky. "Ye-yeah. Thank you. Thanks. Y-you'll be a good best friend, Steve."

Out the window, Billy was holding his textbook and homework, his pencil poised, but he was staring at them.

He met them in the hall outside typing class, leaning against the bank of lockers. His gaze flicked from Steve's face, to Nancy's, then dropped to their hands. Steve scooted away from her, then reached through the press of people and prodded her shoulder with two fingers. He beckoned her to follow him over to Billy.

"Harrington," Billy crossed his arms, watching them. His cheeks and lips were pink with cold, and Steve wanted to *kiss* them, brush the melted snowflakes out of Billy's hair, and rub the muscles of Billy's arms through the sleeves of Steve's own borrowed sweatshirt, feeling his boyfriend shiver, and hugging him close. Billy's voice was flat as he said, "Wheeler," and Steve jumped, jarred from his fantasy.

Steve opened his mouth to tell Billy that Nancy had practically admitted he was better in bed than Jonathan, and then stopped and *thought* for once, about how that would hit Billy's brain. He lowered his voice. "Remember I told you about Barb, uh, Barbra Holland, Nancy's friend, the monsters got her?"

"...I guess," Billy had his gaze fixed on Nancy's face, eyes narrowed.

"She wants to hold a funeral," Steve started, but Billy's glare didn't shift. "Nancy does, uh, and I'm going, because I knew her, and Jonathan didn't, because he's not cool, and he makes these faces when—"

"Don't you *dare*," Nancy hissed.

"Wait, what," Billy glanced at Steve, still keeping a wary eye on Nancy.

"Probably her *boyfriend* will still be there, because she'll be sad, but I'm her *friend* so I'm going too—" Steve babbled, hoping someone else would talk.

"What," Billy said flatly.

“Help,” Steve hissed, widening his eyes. “Help us, um.”

Nancy started snickering for *no reason*, and Billy’s frown darkened. “He panicked when I started to cry,” she snorted, rubbing her eyes. “He wants you to fix it.”

“What?!” Billy snorted, coughing.

“What do people do at funerals,” Steve hissed, glancing at Nancy again, and she snorted wetly, covered her nose, and dug in her backpack before yanking out a kleenex and blowing hard.

“Sexy,” Billy muttered, and Steve elbowed him. Billy glanced between them again, raising his eyebrows. “That’s what all that cozy whispering was about?”

Steve made a face. “Also she had goldfish crackers?”

“We were just talking,” Nancy said, laughing and wiping her eyes again “—and then I lost my shit. Sorry.”

“She had a whole cow about how much better I am at picking boyfriends than she is,” Steve waggled his eyebrows. Nancy elbowed him, and Billy’s snorted, his eyes narrowed as he glanced between them.

“Thought you were dumping my ass and leaving me with Denise.”

Steve shook his head, holding his hands up. “We know *she* makes weird faces.”

“It’s not her fault she has thirty-nine eyes!” Billy laughed, hugging himself in Steve’s sweatshirt. Steve wished *he* could hug his boyfriend, right there in the highschool hallway, but had to settle for his sweatshirt doing it. Billy didn’t seem to notice as Steve reached out, then yanked his hands back and stuck them in his pockets. Billy was still grinning about his awful gift. He leaned in, digging his chin into Steve’s shoulder and whispering, “Ask your buddy Dustin why his pockets are full of googly eyes, seems questionable to me—”

“Steve and I were talking about *boys*,” Nancy snorted, then sniffled, rubbing her nose and rummaging in her purse until she found

another kleenex.

“Swapping stories,” Steve grinned, watching Billy’s head cock warily. He dropped his voice to a whisper. “My boy’s *always* sexy. He just melts against me. Like pizza cheese, y’know, in Little Caesar’s ads, it sort of—it sort of *droops*—”

Billy went as glowing red as the tail lights on his Camaro, and growled, as Nancy leaned into the lockers in a gale of laughter.

“Shut the hell up, Harrington,” Billy muttered, rubbing his face.

“Sexy Little Caesar’s boyfriend?!” Nancy wheezed. “Steve, that’s not sexy *at all*—”

“Or on lasagna. Or Velveeta, it’s—it’s all fluid, you know,” said Steve, trying to explain. “Um, ‘hot, fresh, and ready to go?’” he suggested, relying on Pizza Hut for his words, but they both turned away, Nancy pounding her fist on a locker, cackling and wiping tears, and Billy stomping off down the hall. Steve glared at Nancy. “Don’t you tell anyone either.”

“Oh no,” Nancy gasped. “I—I’m telling Barb. Oh my god, she’d have loved that. She kept telling me you were a moron—”

“Hey!” Steve pointed a finger at her. “She—she may be—she shouldn’t have *said* it!”

“I won’t tell anyone else you described your boyfriend as sexy mozzarella,” she snickered, blowing her nose. “But I am telling her that, aloud, at her funeral. Oh my god, I needed that. You better go find him.”

“*Everyone* likes pizza!” Steve yelled, stomping away after Billy.

As he walked around the corner, Billy grabbed him around the waist from behind and *lifted* him.

Steve yelled and swore, wriggling and laughing. He tried to squirm enough to make Billy drop him, kicking wildly, then finally made a

big show of bending his upper body over Billy's arms to kick his leg up and retie his shoe, while Billy staggered and swore, leaning away to balance his weight and shaking with laughter. Finally, Billy sat him on his feet in an empty hallway, spun him around, and stuck his thumb in the fly of Steve's pants, pressing close and panting in his ear.

Steve looked back the way they came and saw a girl from his class: Robin Buckley. She was staring.

Billy felt him freeze, and pulled back, eyes narrowed. "What?" When he started to look around, Steve panicked and grabbed his head, wanting to save some unrelated girl from being fed her own molars. He pressed their lips together, humming as Billy huffed a laugh. When Steve glanced over Billy's shoulder again, she was gone.

Crisis somewhat averted, Steve told himself sternly to track her down later, before letting himself lean into Billy again. He rubbed his thumb over Billy's moustache, pressing into its scratchiness, and licking into Billy's hot mouth, then pushed him back, taking deep breaths through his nose. "Christ, gonna come in my pants," he whispered, laughing.

"That's fine," Billy's grin widened.

"It's not! It's not *fine*, it's grody—" Steve panted, pushing back at Billy's hands and shoulders as his boyfriend tried to wriggle closer, like an octopus.

"Come on my tongue," Billy whispered.

"There's no time, I gave you to El!" Steve hissed, holding his forearms up defensively. "She'll show up again! You agreed! You're hers and Max's today!" His shoulderblades thudded against the lockers.

"When do I get my reward for following orders, your majesty," Billy whispered, pulling Steve's forearms close, so he could kiss along the soft inner side.

"Sometimes knights have duties," Steve whispered back. "For the, uh, the kingdom."

“And I’m your best knight,” Billy snorted, running his hands up Steve’s sides. “Gotta help the civilians. Do my quests, make you proud.”

“Mmmn,” Steve lost his train of thought, leaning into Billy’s chest, and sliding his arms around his neck. “Best knight.”

“Now Tommy’s been, what,” Billy laughed against his mouth, hugging him until Steve’s muscles went loose, and his bones felt like they’d creak. “Unshielded?”

“Dis-sworded?” Steve supplied muzzily, into another pause between kissing, his brain narrowing its world to Billy’s tongue. “God, love you, mustard...dipshit...cupcake,” he mumbled, then frowned, coming back to earth as Billy’s shoulders shook with laughter. “Shut up, dickhead. Wait, Tommy wasn’t ever my *knight*.”

“Thought he beat up Jonathan Byers for you,” Billy whispered, sliding both arms around Steve’s waist again, and lifting him off the ground.

“No,” Steve mumbled, half-listening as he tried to clamp his legs around Billy’s waist, but missed distractedly, running his hands up Billy’s neck, cupping the back of his head and licking into his mouth.

Billy pulled back to talk, and Steve huffed. “But he tried to get you over to his house. That time. With Carol,” Billy panted, searching Steve’s face.

Steve kicked, gasping as his lungs got squashed. “Holy shit,” he wheezed, laughing. “You—you’re—are you *jealous*?”

“No,” Billy whispered, suddenly interested in kissing again.

Steve pulled back from Billy’s mouth after just one more kiss. “Are you *jealous* of *Tommy and Nancy*,” he whispered, beaming.

“Fuck you,” Billy mumbled, biting gently up his neck.

Steve let his eyes close, forgetting about Robin, and El, and the extremely public hallway they were standing in. His face was so hot it felt tingly, and Billy’s arms were strong and gentle, holding him

up. The world started to spin, a little, and he kicked his feet back, crossing them against his butt to curve his whole body against Billy's.

"Can't—can't breathe, Knight," he had to admit, finally, and Billy sat him back on his feet.

"As you wish, my King," he whispered back, stepping back to look Steve over—he grinned as he assessed the tightness of Steve's pants like an asshole, then leaned in again for one more close-mouthed kiss.

Steve laughed, unable to stop smiling. "You're *jealous*. Want me all to yourself."

"Nah," Billy rubbed his thumb up Steve's cheek, and yanked his head around by the earlobe. Steve yelled, flailing. "I can just get another one," Billy whispered. "King Harringtons. On sale today. K-Mart Special."

"No you *can't*," Steve grabbed Billy's shirt, spinning him to press him up against a locker, and leaning close again for a messy kiss. He could feel Billy breathing against his chest. "You're *jealous*. You—you'd—" Steve trailed off, watching Billy bare his teeth. "You—what the hell are you pissed for," he whispered. "You went off and screwed *Tommy*, don't be pissed at *me* —"

"I'm not *jealous*," Billy snarled back. "I'm the only one who even *pays attention* to you, aren't I, and I could get somebody else in—in a heartbeat—"

Steve took a sharp breath, wondering why he had to go and *push* things. "Right, yeah," he said, slamming his hand into the locker next to Billy, who flinched. "Shit," Steve groaned, stepping back. "Sorry, shit. The hell was I thinking. I'm too *goddamn* clingy, right? You're just trying—trying to—" he stepped back a few steps and smacked another locker across the hall—the bang was satisfying—and Billy grabbed his wrist, digging his thumb in bruisingly tight.

"You gonna start hitting?" he asked, smiling his widest. "You don't get to do that."

"I hit the *locker*," Steve hissed, yanking his arm, and Billy stepped closer.

"You don't get to hit me," Billy whispered, and Steve winced at the feel of fingernails. "You—you can't pull that *shit*, Harrington."

"I wasn't *gonna*," Steve tried to yank away again, feeling *worse*. "Screw you, I hit a *locker*—"

"After all that shit you said," Billy said evenly, his smile and his eyes wide the way they went when he might do *anything*. "I'm a *person*, remember?"

"I *remember*," Steve swallowed again against the burning in his throat and eyes, planting his feet to try and squirm away. "I wasn't—"

"You change your mind?" Billy asked softly, and Steve *did* want to hit him, then.

"Let me go," he hissed. "I wasn't going to hit you, *christ*. I was hitting the *fucking locker*." Billy let go and stepped back, and Steve spun to slam his fist into the locker again. His little finger was starting to go numb, and he wondered how other people—really awful people, some of them, like Billy's dad—found people that loved them and *trusted them* and paid *attention*. He inhaled, and it made kind of a wet gasping noise. "Jesus," he whispered. "Just—just g-go home."

"Screw you," Billy muttered, and Steve opened his mouth to growl back, when his gaze caught on Billy's nails digging into his sleeve over where Steve had drawn the hearts.

"Fucking—*stop*," he hissed, grabbing Billy's fingers, and forcing them to unbend. They were cold. "You're gonna give yourself bruises. Stop it, dickhead—*quit*—"

"Quit what," Billy snarled back, and Steve stared down at the hand he'd grabbed, then let go and stomped across the hall to kick somebody else's locker.

"Screw you," Steve muttered. "Fine, go the hell home." He hunched his shoulders as Billy stepped closer, and banged his fist on the locker

he'd just kicked. "Piss off."

"The hell do you want me to say," Billy asked, and Steve shut his eyes, and banged the locker again.

"*Nothing*," Steve hissed. "I don't want you to say *anything*, I—you can—you can go to *hell*—" Billy came up behind him, and Steve squeezed his eyes shut. They were stinging. He felt a touch on his arm, and flinched into the lockers, swallowing a few times to clear his throat of the *bullshit* trying to climb out of it. "It's fine," he forced out. "Just. Piss off. Go home. I'll—I'll get myself—together." He opened his eyes, parting his lips in a smile, to see Billy standing close, frowning, so Steve was sandwiched between him and the lockers.

"Wha—" Billy started, and Steve smacked a hand over Billy's mouth, then sidestepped, laughing.

He took a few steps down the hall before he managed to stop himself. "Just go," he said, realizing he had his hands up between he and Billy, and lowering them. "It's fine, it's *nothing*, *jesus*—"

"What in the hell—" Billy stepped closer again, and Steve *didn't* lunge to cover his mouth, or cover his own ears, or run away.

He kept smiling. "Max and El are probably looking for you."

"...no," Billy said, holding his hands out. "Come here, Harrington."

"What," Steve laughed, his sinuses burning as his vision went a little blurry. He blinked his eyes clear as Billy's glare went thunderous.

"I'm not gonna chase you down, get your ass over here."

"Why?" Steve asked, crossing his arms, uncrossing them, and touching his hair. It was fine. He thought fixedly about the project he was gonna start in ceramics. Probably it was dumb to make Billy something *nice*. Something with Steve's *feeblings* just emblazoned over it. "Just go, *jesus*."

"Harrington—" Billy sighed, and Steve's stomach clenched.

"Sorry," he grated out. "Sorry, I'll get it together—" he cut off,

raising his arms defensively as Billy walked close enough to grab him by the front of his pants and yank him in for a kiss. His hands were warm and gentle cradling Steve's face, and Steve let himself be pulled in. "What—" he whispered, but Billy cut him off, tilting Steve's head to get deeper into his mouth. "Mmf," Steve tried next, slowly lowering his hands to where *his sweatshirt* stretched over Billy's biceps.

"Two for flinching," Billy told him, kissing him again. "Ssh," Billy whispered, glancing around, and then pushing them both—slowly, and mostly by kissing Steve—across the hall again and into the bathroom. He stopped to check under the doors, and then grabbed Steve's hand, and yanked him into the biggest stall. "Okay," he said, "—go on."

"...want me to try giving a blow job?" Steve asked, rubbing his eyes. "I mean. You let me jack you off, I wanna—"

Billy opened his mouth, cocked his head, and narrowed his eyes. "Shut up. Shit, that's not—I'm not supposed to—to try and blow you when you're pissed—what the *fuck*, Harrington—"

"I'm just trying to *change the subject*," Steve gritted out. "You *like* blow jobs. *Everybody* likes blow jobs—"

"I mean," Billy snorted, slowly nudging Steve against the wall, "—*dicks* like 'em—"

"Everybody does, it's just not called a blow job always," Steve argued, feeling smart, as Billy kissed him again. It felt like Billy was laughing.

"*S'true*—" Steve muttered, and Billy laughed harder, and yanked him closer, so Steve's head was pressed against Billy's shoulder, and Steve's body was squeezed in Billy's arms.

"Shut up, *jesus*," he whispered, his earring tickling Steve's neck. "What's your *problem*."

The thing was, Steve thought, there wasn't one. He was freaking out for no reason—he *knew* his bullshit annoyed people, and everything

Billy'd said was true. "Sorry," he breathed. It was easier, in the heat of Billy squishing him against the wall.

"What do you want me to—"

"Nothing," Steve cut him off. "Christ. Jesus. I'm gonna do *better* this time, and *shut the hell up* before I—"

"What," Billy whispered, and Steve shook his head, smiling, and didn't say *before I ruin everything*.

Billy pulled back, his jaw clenched. "I'll get it out of you." Steve choked on a laugh, clenching his fingers on Billy's arms, and Billy stared into his eyes, thinking. "I could do what *you* did," he whispered. "Get you so horny you're *dripping* and then make you talk."

"Oh shit, no," Steve snickered harder, shaking his head. "No, don't. I wouldn't even—I wouldn't be able to think enough."

"That's kind of the point," Billy said against his mouth, and Steve's heart started pounding.

"No, no, don't, I really—I can't even—" Steve tried to squirm away, every breath of Billy's resonating with his dick. "I can't tell you if I can't make words!"

"Mmm," Billy hummed thoughtfully, leaning in for another kiss. "You really want to hear I'm jealous of—of Tommy? That what you want me to say?"

"You're not, though," Steve shrugged.

"...Nancy, then," Billy cleared his throat. "I keep waiting to hear you say you're—that—that I'm not—that you took a better offer."

"Fuck you," Steve told him, sighing. "What the hell am *I* gonna do when you two actually *talk* and you—you start talking—*elves* or something and forget all about me."

"...you're jealous of *me* talking to *Nancy Wheeler*," Billy said, with the vague tone of someone reading an incomprehensible line in English

class.

“You’re both *perfect*,” Steve told him, grabbing him close, and Billy started laughing so hard he staggered.

“Oh my god, you are so fucking dumb,” he wheezed, and Steve licked his lips, pressed them to Billy’s neck, and *blew* to make the loudest fart noise he could. Billy yelped, shoving weakly at him, and Steve did it again. Finally, Billy got his hands over Steve’s mouth, and used his body weight to hold them there while he rubbed tears off onto his arms. “If you think I’m *perfect* you’re *blind* and stupid. Holy jesu,” he whispered.

It wasn’t that funny, Steve thought indignantly. “You’re perfect. You—you’re—you *are*. Sometimes. Most of the time! You—you’re *better*, you don’t—”

Billy kept snickering, like an asshole. “You’d run off with your queen in a *second*, your majesty,” he whispered, grinning. “She’ll whistle one day. She’ll just—crook her finger, and you’ll go.”

“Would *not*,” said Steve, automatically, but he considered. “I don’t...” He narrowed his eyes at the wall of the bathroom stall, where someone had written that the principal worshipped Satan. He thought about how his plans had always included Nancy, and how hers never seemed to include him.

What would it be like, he wondered, *if she knocked on my door. ‘Follow me to the city,’ she’d say. ‘You can hold down the apartment, I can go to college. Someday I’ll have an important job—*which was where it fell apart, because it would be something like war journalism, and she’d always be gone. He sighed, imagining the *Dear Steve* letter. *‘Dear Steve, I’ve gone to expose nuclear testing on smuggled baby alligators in Belgium, and...found love.’* Steve shook his head. “No. No, it’s—no.”

“Whaddaya mean *no*,” Billy laughed. “You just sat there and *imagined* it.”

“Yeah, imagined it blowing up in my *face*. I want to—” Steve stopped, looking away from Billy’s eyes and down, until Billy started jerking Steve’s head up and around, trying to meet his eyes again.

Steve laughed, and bit his lip.

“What d’you want, Harrington?” Billy asked.

“...wanna wait and see if you send me letters,” Steve told him, shrugging. “I—I guess. Once you leave.”

“Oh, I’m gonna,” Billy’s breath caught, and he pressed his hands to Steve’s cheeks, squishing them. “But you’re lying to *both* of us if you think you wouldn’t drop me—”

“Billy,” Steve said, muffledly through the fishface Billy was giving him, and grabbing Billy’s hands as he startled. “Billy Hargrove. I—I’d pick you.”

“Don’t bullshit me—”

“Pay attention,” Steve hissed. “Hargrove. Fuckface...trespasser. I’d pick *you*.” Billy shook his head, smirking, and Steve grabbed it by the curls, pressing their foreheads together to hold Billy’s gaze. “If I have to watch somebody leave, I’d still want you.”

“Shit,” Billy said hoarsely, trying to laugh. “I’ll come *back*, I wouldn’t—I wouldn’t *leave* leave, you—you can’t get rid of me if you—if you don’t tell me to go.”

“Like I would,” Steve snorted. “If—if Nancy just—just walked in here, I mean, not *here* here,” he paused, his eyes focusing on the wall of the men’s bathroom, “—but y’know, if—if she said she’d changed, she—she wanted me back...”

“You’d go,” Billy shrugged.

“No, Nancy can’t—she doesn’t want—this.”

“She’s got shitty taste, then,” Billy growled, and Steve laughed, leaning to bury his face under Billy’s ear.

“No, I mean—she doesn’t want—” he sighed. “She sure doesn’t wanna drag me to the bathroom and grill me on what’s wrong. She’s got—things to do. Important stuff.”

“Her loss,” Billy shrugged, and Steve snorted wetly. Billy’s breaths sounded as catchy and uneven as his did, he realized, and squeezed him closer.

“Promise I wouldn’t go,” he mumbled.

“Promise Denise,” Billy hissed, growling over Steve’s bursting into semi-hysterical giggles. “Denise needs both her dads,” Billy whispered, his eyes brimming as Steve laughed and cried.

“You’re so weird,” he whispered. “So fucking glad you—not the rest of it—but I’m, uh. I’m so goddamn glad you ended up at my house.”

“You brought me home in a trunk,” Billy told him, sniffing, and frowning down to yank at Steve’s belt buckle.

“What if I hadn’t,” Steve asked, watching Billy fumble. “Maybe—maybe something else. Maybe you’d have kissed me in the locker room. Always trying to shove me around in there—why you always trying to jump me in *bathrooms*, you’re so—”

“Maybe you’d have kissed *me* somewhere, fucking...Pussington,” Billy growled, undoing Steve’s belt, and laughing as the denim over Steve’s dick twitched against his hands. He ran his fingers up and down Steve’s fly.

“Jesus,” Steve whispered.

“Fuck me,” Billy whispered back. “I want this monster in me.”

“...you called it *fun-size*,” Steve hissed back, and Billy started giggling again, burying his face in Steve’s neck. “We’re in a *bathroom*, the *floor is sticky* —”

“I don’t wanna wait,” Billy told him, kissing him so enthusiastically Steve’s head thudded back against the wall. “You—you said—want me over *Wheeler* —”

“I know what I said,” Steve said, trying to sound strict, but he couldn’t help grinning. “Want me to blow you? You always—”

“No, fuck my ass,” Billy ordered, leaning close, so Steve could feel the

hard line of Billy's cock pressing against his.

"...there's no—it'll *hurt*, knight, it—"

"Who cares," Billy whispered, yanking the buttons open on Steve's fly.

"Me!" Steve hissed, grabbing his wrists. "I care! Christ!"

"S'my ass," Billy argued, looking *pouty*, and Steve snorted.

"S'my *dick*, wouldn't feel good for me *either*—"

"Coward," Billy said, frowning down. "Okay, okay—" he yanked at his *own* pants, hopping on one foot, and Steve started sniggering. He grabbed Billy's face and pulled him in for a kiss, nearly knocking them both over when Billy tripped over the leg of his pants. "MMPH," Billy yelped. "Shit. Okay. Just—uh, just—"

His face felt hot against Steve's hands, and he realized the red was creeping clear down Billy's chest where the sweatshirt hung open. "What?" Steve asked, his eyes lingering on Billy's briefs, where a wet stain was spreading where the elastic strained over his cock.

"I'm gonna turn around," Billy muttered, "—and—"

"No—" Steve repeated, running his hands along the elastic band of Billy's Fruit of the Looms. "No, seriously, I'm not—"

"I'll *squeeze my legs together*," said Billy, with gritted teeth, his face *flaming* hot.

"Holy shit," Steve whispered, his hips bucking against Billy's hip as he turned around. "What—is—is that any good for *you*—"

"Just *fuck* me," Billy hissed, bracing his hands against the wall, and Steve stepped close behind him, reaching down to yank his skivvies down, and then push Billy's down over the warm muscley roundness of his ass. Billy yanked until his dick was freed, then braced himself again, and Steve buried his face in Billy's shoulder, taking a deep breath.

“Can’t see how this is good for *you*,” he whispered against Billy’s neck, feeling him shiver.

“It’s *not* unless you get *moving*,” Billy snarled, then choked out a gasp as Steve slid his hand around to grab him by the cock.

“Just...between your thighs, then,” Steve whispered, rubbing some pre-come around the top of his dick, then frowning down, and licking his hand just in case.

“Come *on*,” Billy whispered. “Come on, come on, do me.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay,” Steve nodded pointlessly, aimed, and pressed into the tight space between Billy’s muscled thighs. “Oh god, that’s good,” he mumbled against Billy’s shoulder, and he laughed.

“Shut up and move,” Billy muttered, since Steve was mostly clinging and muttering bullshit endearments.

“God,” Steve whispered, reaching around again. “Don’t *fall*, b-babe, uh, cookie.”

“Billy whe-when we’re fucking,” Billy told him, groaning as Steve tried to steady himself between his hips smacking Billy’s butt, his dick sandwiched in the heat of Billy’s thighs—it was slippery enough, he thought, flushing almost as red as Billy was—and dragging his fist up and down Billy’s dick.

“*Billy*,” Steve said against his ear, and Billy swallowed a moan, letting his head fall forward to thunk against the wall. “Billy Hargrove.”

“Nng,” Billy grunted.

“L-love you, Billy Hargrove,” Steve told him, and he whined, his shoulders flinching forward. Steve kissed the place where his shoulder joined his neck, feeling him shudder. “Love you, Billy.”

Billy came all over his fingers, and Steve started laughing, because of *course* Billy’s legs bent, and of *course* they collapsed to the floor of the highschool bathroom.

Steve let them tip sideways, pulling Billy close to slow their fall and

ignoring the weird chemical smell as his jaw smushed against the tiles. Billy was swearing under his breath, squirming around, and Steve summoned enough brain to scoot back. “Ssh,” he whispered, snickering, with tears in his eyes. “Don’t break my dick.”

“Where you *going*, asshole,” Billy hissed, rolling over to lay half on top of Steve’s chest. He grabbed Steve’s cock, stroking it, and Steve bucked up against him, muttering just...noises, really.

He came to himself panting against Billy’s shoulder. “Mmm,” he said, wondering whether they could just sleep on the floor, and wash their faces for class the next morning.

“...you really jealous?” Billy asked, at the ceiling, like he’d been thinking a while.

Steve groaned, tucking hair out of his eyes.

“Y’know I’d...fucking kill them—anyone—and step on their *corpses* to get to you,” Billy told the ceiling, and Steve started laughing again.

“S’not a bit creepy,” he said, his voice weirdly deep in his ears.

“Not sure wanting to kill Tommy Hagen is creepy at all,” Billy commented, rolling his head for a kiss. “I mean, that’s normal, right, anybody would—”

“Think I’ve got toilet paper stuck to my leg,” Steve whispered.

“I guess you wouldn’t know normal if it bit you on the ass,” Billy told him, and Steve hefted himself up the couple of inches for another kiss.

“Means I get you, though,” he mumbled, dropping to rest his face on Billy’s chest again. It went from warm to hot, and Steve grinned, rubbing his face in chest hair and muscle.

“Shut up, you’re such a freak,” Billy muttered, and pressed more kisses to Steve’s hair. “Tommy Hagen, seriously? You’re jealous of *Tommy Hagen*? *That’s* you being a moron.”

“Mmn,” Steve was sort of listening, so he politely made a noise.

“Just went over to Carol’s ‘cause I broke your door,” Billy said. “Thought you’d be pissed. Thought you’d—” he took a slow breath, swallowing. “An-anyway, I didn’t think you’d just...pick me up. Carry me on your back. Thought I’d have to, uh, bribe my way back in.”

“...you saying you got me a present?” Steve asked, waking up a little, and Billy squeezed him.

“I’m saying I didn’t care where I went, Jesus. Could have been the gas station. Not running around on you with Exxon, either.”

You might, Steve thought, snorting, but he scooted closer. His shoes squeaked against the wet tile by the toilet. “We’re gonna stink,” he sighed.

“You saying you wanna go shower together?” Billy breathed against Steve’s temple, and Steve started sniggering.

“I mean, yeah,” he whispered back, grinning so hard his cheeks felt tired. “But probably we should like...go. You’re making your sister wait. And El.”

“And they’re important to my liege,” Billy groaned.

“They’re kinda violent when they’re pissed off,” Steve whispered back, and Billy started snickering into Steve’s hair. Steve grinned up at the dripping cracks in the ceiling, letting his eyes fall shut. “I’ll—just—just take the car. Take it. Get the girls, whatever they want. I need to—better present. Than *Denise*.”

“No present’s better than *Denise*,” Billy’s grin went smirky, but he saluted Steve’s eyeroll, and once they managed to get upright, sauntered off with his hands in the pockets of Steve’s stolen sweatshirt.

Steve adjusted himself in his jeans, wishing he wasn’t quite so...sticky, and walked *a bit awkwardly* off to his locker, when he was grabbed for the second time that day.

“What?!” Robin flailed her arms, hissing. “What was *that*?!”

“*There* you are,” Steve hissed, then stopped dead, realizing he hadn’t thought up any kind of plan. “...nothing?” he answered, like a genius, smoothing his hair where Billy’d run his fingers through it. “Uh, what? What was...what.”

She stared at him. “I *saw* you, *dingus*.”

“No, you didn’t. Saw what?”

“How are you *alive*, you are *so dumb*,” she muttered, spinning away, then back. “That was—you were—” she clasped her hands together, taking a deep breath through her nose, and started to snicker. “You—that’s your *cover*? ‘What was what?’ You—that’s what you’re gonna say?”

Steve’s high from Billy’s kisses was gone, and he was trying not to imagine Billy’s reaction to someone *seeing them*. His stomach clenched. “Look, don’t, nothing—nothing was—your—it’s *none of your business*, *jesus*.”

“What?!” she cackled, her eyes widening. “Christ. You’re just gonna make out *at school* and ignore it when—what if—what if your *pal Tommy* sees you? He’s gonna—”

“I *blackmailed* him,” Steve folded his arms, leaning back against the locker. “I have *dirt* on him, he’s not gonna squeal—”

“You *what*?!” she squealed herself, leaning one arm to steady herself against the locker as she sniggered so hard she shook. “Have you been watching *gangster* movies?”

“Shut up! You didn’t see anything—”

“I sure did,” she made a face, shuddering. “Believe me, I would not have imagined you and Hargrove playing *tonsil hockey*, but it’s a nightmare I’ll take to the grave—”

“Shut *up*,” he hissed, swallowing. His throat felt dry. “I—you can’t tell anyone. I’ll say you’re lying. You’ll be that *liar* girl, I’ll—”

“God, I don’t want to *remember* it, let alone *describe* it,” she pretended to gag, melodramatically doubling over with her fingers in her throat.

“Gag me, Steve. Gag me with a *spoon*.”

Steve wrinkled his nose. “Great. Don’t tell anyone, and we’ll stay the hell away from each other.” He remembered wondering how people in his classes would react to finding out he was maybe-sort-of-gay, and he kind of wanted to punch her in the face. “Or I—I’ll get *gay cooties* on you.”

She turned to stare. “I don’t care about *that, dipshit*, I care I almost saw *two entire penises* when I was just trying to *leave class*. Here I thought I’d go to my grave without getting *close* to one of those—” she stuck her tongue out, flapping her hand at the wrist, her voice distorted by the face she was making, “—gross floppy *baby injectors*, and there they were—”

“What,” he stopped, arms up in a flail, but still. “Wait. What?”

“I’m not going to *tell anyone, Steve Harrington*,” she told him, rolling her eyes. “Besides, somebody else is going to figure you out, like, instantly, nothing to do with *me*.” She turned to stalk away, then spun on her heel to face him again. “But what the *hell* is wrong with you?! You don’t even—can’t you make some excuse and get the keys to the gym equipment room?! You can’t make out *during class*, when people aren’t wandering around?! Instead you’re sucking face *right* after the bell rings? I had to tell *two different people* there was a *sewage leak* down that hall, dumbass.”

Steve blinked at her. “Th—that’s a good idea. I didn’t—thanks, man.”

“I didn’t want them to have to see the *gross sight* I had to,” she narrowed her eyes at him. “Can’t you tell people you’re *study buddies* or something? Before I have to see more of Billy Hargrove’s hard-on in his jeans,” she shuddered, and Steve laughed.

“Somebody doesn’t think he’s hot?”

She took a deep breath, her eyes flicking to his face. “Yeah...no. Why would I.”

"I mean, he *is*," he shrugged. "Anyway, thanks. Really. I got, uh, threatened today, kind of. I thought—thanks."

She stilled. "You what," she asked, her voice weirdly raspy.

"Uh, somebody figured us out, said he'd, y'know, tell everyone. Everyone I know." Steve rolled his shoulders uncomfortably.

"What the *shit*," she whispered. "And you—you're—the *same day*?! You just—"

"Look, shut up, I'm not *used* to it yet," he hissed back. "I forget he's a *secret*, okay?!"

"You *moron*," she whispered. "What'd you—are you—"

"I *blackmailed* him, uh, the guy, Tommy," Steve whispered back, weirdly proud. "He won't tell anyone."

"Jesus, what a *prick*." She took a deep breath, and blew through her cheeks. "Tommy Goddamn Hagen, huh. Good thing I wasn't gonna tell anybody *anyway*."

"Phew," he laughed, grinning at her. "I wasn't—I can't even—was just, y'know, going to ask you not to, like, tell. Everyone." He shrugged. Robin narrowed her eyes at him, watching as he kicked at the linoleum. His shoe squeaked. "Thanks for being cool," he told her, feeling a little bit warm knowing there were people at school that wouldn't treat him like he had leprosy. "I guess not everybody's going to hate me."

"Jesus," she whispered, rubbing her face. "I—shut *up*, okay, I wasn't—I'm not that—"

"It's just nice," Steve shrugged. "Bil—I, uh, I didn't know how, um, I guess it can get pretty bad, it's nice to—"

"Yes!" Robin hissed. "Yes, it can! Oh my god, *shut up*. Why are you—you don't *know* me!"

"I do now," Steve told her, grinning, but he watched her clench her hands in frustration, and recognized someone who wished he'd

leave. "Sorry. Thanks. Sorry," he smiled automatically, and turned away.

"Ugh," she groaned.

"Thanks," he called over his shoulder again. "I'm glad it was you!"

"Auuuugh," she yelled after him. "Stop *talking* about it, you *moron*! Somebody could *hear* you!"

He couldn't resist turning to face her, walking backwards down the hall and stage-whispering, "Now I know it's safe to tell you, we can talk about boys."

"I don't want to *talk about boys*!" Robin screamed, soft and wheezily in the back of her throat.

"You know you want to," Steve whisper-shouted back, wagging his eyebrows, and she smacked her own face. "Nancy and I are *friends* now," he told her, cupping his hands around his mouth. "Gonna have all the gossip, right here, don't change that channel!"

"*Nancy Wheeler* doesn't have *gossip*," she hissed back, "Nancy Wheeler has—she has *flashcards*, shut up, dipshit—"

"We're gonna do all those—those things that—makeovers," he said, unable to think of anything else. "Sleepovers. Talking about boyfriends."

"Kill me first," Robin replied, through gritted teeth. "I will puke, I swear to god."

"I have all the locker room dirt on everybody," Steve said, clapping his hands together as he realized. "I know how big—"

"Eugh!" she actually *shouted* over him. "*Gross!* I do *not* want to know! I don't want to know what *Tommy Hagen's* dick is like, holy shit!"

"Yeah, I kinda wish I didn't either," Steve said, reflecting, but Robin was on a tear.

"I don't want to—I don't even—I wouldn't think *Billy Hargrove* was hot unless his name was spelled with an -ie," she said through clenched teeth, and he mouthed the letters, frowning into space. "Like. If he was named *Wilhelmina*, Steve."

"That's an awful name," he turned to frown at her doubtfully. "And—and it's for girls, I think."

"The penny drops," she said crisply, which made no sense, but he ignored that, turning her disgust in his head against her insistence she didn't have a problem with his gay cooties.

"You're a *lesbian*," he whispered, pointing, and she clapped her hand to her face. Steve thought. "I thought I was the only one at school! We were. The only queer people, at school. There's, uh, there's a kid, but he's a middle-schooler. And Barbra Holland, maybe? She and Nancy watched some *weird* movies."

"How do you know what kind of...ugh, y'know what, I'm going home," Robin sighed. "Try not to get *expelled*, I guess?"

"I won't tell anyone," he said quickly, feeling the urge to lift his hand to pinky-swear. He snickered. "We should have a secret handshake."

"You *better* not tell anyone," she hissed back, but she looked relieved too, and they stood there for long awkward seconds before she spun and stomped off. "I still don't like you!" she shouted back, and he bit back a grin.

Once he'd talked to the ceramics teacher, he sat down with his headphones and the potter's wheel, trying to dig his fingers into the heavy wetness of the clay enough to bring up a thin edge, but not so much they went through. About the point it started to look like a deep cat dish instead of an ashtray, he realized there were knees facing his, and he shook his head to knock his headphones down to his shoulders, instead of getting clay on them.

The lovely and intelligent Nancy Wheeler had her chin on her hands, and her elbows on her knees, watching him spin the clay.

“Hi,” he said, suddenly wanting to fix his hair, and clenching his hands so he didn’t put streaks of clay in it.

“What’s that gonna be?”

“...I dunno,” he said, which was a lie, probably. “I might screw it up.” Which was true.

“I think I see it,” she cocked her head as he used his fingertips to draw it up taller, “—with Billy. I thought you might—need help, y’know. Sorry.”

“What?!” He blinked at her, letting the wheel slow to a stop.

“I see it now. He was freaking out, when you just—ran out of the library, that time. Mike said he’s been really good to Will, and Eleven. I mean, if he pulls any shit with you we should absolutely tie him to train tracks. But.”

“That’s very...evil of you.” Steve stared at her, wide-eyed.

She rolled her eyes, and waved a hand. “His dad *too*, obviously.”

Steve snorted, choking. “Obviously.” He pulled his clay cylinder up a little taller and thinner, his face warm. The clay had lines where he’d pressed too hard, almost giving it segments. “...argh, this is my third try, and it’s *still* not straight.”

“...neither are you,” she replied, levelly, and he nearly smashed it, flailing.

“*Nancy*,” he growled at her, and she shrugged, watching him wet his hands and try to even it out.

She followed him around as he sliced it off the wheel with wire, took it to a table, and sculpted a handle. When he got to rolling more clay out, and cutting a little plaque to press letters into, she came and leaned over his shoulder, and he flushed as he inhaled her shampoo. “...that looks good, actually,” she murmured in his ear, and he winced away. She wandered back around the table to drop onto the stool across from him.

“‘Actually’?!” he muttered, and she snorted. “Sorry I was a shitty boyfriend,” he told the little letters he was painstakingly carving.

“Mm.” She shrugged. “I mean, I was kinda shitty too, there at the end.”

He opened his mouth, automatically, to tell her she was perfect and amazing, then shut it again. He bit his lips, frowning down, then blew air through his cheeks, and carefully peeled up the little clay plaque shape to press on the crosshatched side of his clay cylinder.

“We’re getting better at it,” she said, looking it over, and then reached across and prodded his shoulder. “That’s sweet, Steve.”

“Eugh,” he sighed, leaning his face on the table. “Hope he thinks so.”

She groaned. “He liked *Denise*, Steve.”

“How come everybody knows my dumb vase’s name,” he mumbled into his arms, and she laughed.

“I hear everything. Little bird told me you might need a ride.”

Steve lifted his head, frowning at her. “...what?”

“He took your car, right?”

“I think Eleven took *him*,” Steve defended Billy, and Nancy grinned at him, nudging his elbow.

“Yeah, in *your car*.”

“Who knows where they’ll end up,” Steve sighed. He tried not to think about kissing Billy Hargrove in the bathroom at the IHOP. “Uh, she keeps making him take her for waffles.” Billy’d flinched back when he walked in the IHOP bathroom, he thought, leaning his face in his arms again. *How did I not stop and think about that.*

Nancy got up and leaned against the table. “And it’s snowing again, so you need a ride. Thanks, Nancy. You’re such a *good friend*, Nancy.”

He looked up, and quailed under the weight of her raised eyebrows. "Thanks. Who's the little bird?"

"Billy," she said, raising her eyebrows further. "Or rather, he was asking how long Max and Eleven needed, and Eleven asked what I was doing after school."

"Sorry," Steve snickered, imagining Billy's expression. "I could've walked."

She shrugged. "I'm still here."

Once he finished, and put his Valentine's Day present to Billy on a rack to dry, they wandered out to Nancy's mom's car. As she checked the mirrors, and put on her seatbelt, Steve took a deep breath, couldn't decide what to say, and sat there with his cheeks inflated like a chipmunk's, squinting at the dashboard.

"...what are you doing," she laughed.

"I, um. You know Robin Buckley?"

Nancy frowned at him, then at the rearview mirror to back out of the parking spot. "Yeeeah?"

"She, uh, she saw me and Billy. Earlier."

"So?"

"Uh, we were, uh, she knows." He leaned around to shove his bag in the back seat.

"...need me to go—*talk* to her?" Nancy asked, in a low voice, and Steve squirmed, stuck between the seats, wondering why he knew so many people willing to commit murder in his name.

He shoved himself loose. "No! No! It's, uh, it's fine. She doesn't like dick. I mean, she likes tits, you know. I mean, she's like us. Billy and me. She's queer. She, uh, she won't tell anybody. Shit! I can't tell you that, the whole point was—auuuugh," he groaned, leaning his seat back to add some drama to it. "I wasn't supposed to tell you that, don't tell her I told you—"

“Oh!” Nancy blinked. “Is she?! I thought...” She frowned, pulling around a gaggle of freshmen in jerseys wandering through the parking lot.

“What?” Steve tried to get the seat to click back upright, and fell backwards again, his leg kicking up in the air.

“I thought she had a *thing* for you. She used to glare at us all the time.” Nancy rolled her eyes and groaned, slowing to a top again, and Steve wondered who else was blocking traffic out of the highschool parking lot.

“Did she? Weird.” Steve squinted at the roof of the car, and then remembered something. “Anyway, she won’t say anything. And I need advice. On blow jobs.”

The brakes squawked as Nancy stared over, opening her mouth to answer—or yell, possibly—but something banged at the window, and Steve sat up to see Lucas’ little sister glaring in at them.

“Holy shit,” Nancy muttered, groaning. “Just don’t bite it off, you’ll get the hang of it, oh my *god*—” she hissed, leaning across his legs to roll the window down.

“There’s got to be more to it than *that*,” Steve muttered back, as Erica Sinclair stuck her face in the car.

“I fell asleep first period and got detention,” she yawned. “Marcenia Lyle Alberga snuck out again last night. Tomika and me were out until *four this morning*. And I missed the *bus*, and then I fell asleep in *detention* again...”

“You...what?” Nancy asked, looking lost. “Who?”

“Her friend’s cat sneaks out,” Steve translated.

“She doesn’t like the old Shireman house,” Erica told them, yanking the handle of Nancy’s car door and yawning again. “Lemme in. I missed the bus, I need a ride.”

“Sorry,” Steve said to Nancy, unable to stop his beaming grin. “She’s, uh, Billy’s kid now, I guess? Can we give her a ride?”

“Billy’s,” Nancy repeated, squinting at him, then Erica, and leaning behind Steve’s seat to unlock the door. Once they were all inside, she asked, “Isn’t the old Shireman place haunted, or something?”

“Yeah, Tommy and Carol and I used to...” Steve trailed off, his brain wandering back to being *friends* with Tommy Hagen, and getting high to run around screaming and giggling in the “haunted house”. “We used to...go there,” he finished, folding his arms.

“It’s creepy out there,” Erica said, leaning between their seats. “We’re not supposed to go, the floor’s falling in, but Marcenia’s just a *kitten*.”

“A mean one,” Steve snorted, and Erica snorted.

“She’s a killer. She can’t fight snow, though. I mean, she’d *try*. ”

Steve snickered, and they ended up explaining the afternoon Billy’d played Great White Hunter to Marcenia the Jungle Cat. He was dying to tell Nancy about El’s confusion over Hopper’s lousy sex talk, and trailed off, thinking it wouldn’t be so bad, really, life with Nancy as a *friend*.

As Nancy obeyed every traffic law, exactly at the speed limit, Steve saw Robin Buckley under the overhang of the gas station, hopping around as she knocked snow out of one of her shoes. She sighed, pulled it back on with a disgusted expression, hunched her shoulders, and walked on, just as some melting snow toppled off the edge and smacked into the back of her head and down the back of her collar. She yelled and flailed, dropping her bag, and fell on her butt in the snow, then threw her head back and yelled at the sky.

“Wait!” Steve yelled at Nancy, rolling his window down to stick his head out. “Hey! Oy! Robin Barclay!”

“Buckley,” Nancy corrected.

“Buckley!” Steve called, and Robin squinted over out of the pile of snow she’d landed in, her eyes flat with despair.

“What,” she glared over. “Qu-uh. Uh,” she glanced at Nancy, turning red, and her glower darkened. “*Steve Harrington?*” Ice dripped from

the slush on her head down along her ear, and he heard both Nancy and Erica shudder.

“Can we give her a ride?” he asked Nancy, who was shaking her head slowly in bewilderment, eyes wide. “Please?”

“Sure, of course,” she said, turning up the heat and scrambling behind her to unlock the door. Erica scooted to one side.

“This is your fault,” was Robin’s first shivering line after she climbed in. “I missed the *bus* after, uh, running into you.”

“You’re another one of Steve’s friends?” Erica asked, eyes narrowed considerably, and Steve yelled “Stop kidnapping my friends! No kidnapping!” back at her as Nancy hit the gas.

“I’m very resistant to being kidnapped,” Robin said, sniffing and shivering.

“Unstoppable force, immovable object,” Erica whispered, studying Robin as they drove.

“No,” Steve told her emphatically.

Robin studied Steve and Nancy. “I thought you two broke up,” she said, exaggeratedly innocent, and glared meaningfully at Steve when he turned around to stare at her.

“We did,” Nancy told her, checking her side mirror. “Steve’s my best friend now. He got a battlefield promotion.”

Robin sat back, nodding, and Steve laughed so hard he choked.

Billy’s car was out of the garage and blocking the drive, for some reason, with Steve’s behind it. Steve frowned at it, then raised his eyebrows at Nancy, who narrowed her eyes at him, then got out of the car and walked around as he disentangled his bag from the seatbelt and slammed the door.

“What,” she hissed. “You were making faces.”

“There’s gotta be more than “*don’t bite it off*,” he hissed back. “Come on!”

She made an offended gaspy noise, her mouth dropping open. “You’ve *had* blow jobs!” she squeaked back, flailing her arms. “You know more than me! I don’t even have a dick!”

“How do you not *choke*?” he asked, thinking hard.

“You just *do*!” she growled back, her face *flaming* red. “You’re putting a—a big—a thing down your—where you *breathe*, Steve, how do you think *lungs* work—oh my *god*—”

“Ohhhh,” Steve nodded, and she screamed into her hands.

“If you keep asking me for sex advice I’m gonna suggest you pull your mouth off real loud and sing ‘Pop Goes The Weasel,’” she snarled, and Steve started laughing, blushing nearly as hard as she was at the awkwardness of grilling his ex-girlfriend on blow jobs.

“I know it’s weird,” he laughed, wiping his eyes. “I know, I know, I got nobody else to *ask*, though, Nance, come on!”

She bit her lips together, glaring, then sighed. “...try, uh. Try, um, humming,” she squeaked.

“Humming,” he stared.

“Shut up, never mind!” she groaned, hiding her face.

“No, no, no no no!” he ran around to block her as she turned back to the car. “No, go on, tell me! Tell me, tell me!”

She sighed, smiling tensely at him. “God, Steve. You’re so—argh.”

“I am, I am,” he agreed, “—tell me your secrets, teach me, like, cock karate—”

“Oh my god,” she moaned.

“Do I need to wash cars,” he asked, miming circular hand movements, and she shoved him, laughing.

“We were, y’know, listening to music,” she mumbled, flushing even redder, “—and uh, I was um, y’know, kind of—kind of singing, humming—”

“Ew,” Steve said, waving her onward as he tried not to imagine the soundtrack of Jonathan’s approaching penis. “Yeah, go on—”

“It’s-nice-try-it!” she squeaked, all one noise, and ducked by him to dive into the car. He waved, but she bent close around the steering wheel as Erica ran around to take shotgun.

Steve crept in the front door to the caterwauling sounds of a circular saw.

The door to the garage from the kitchen was open, and his parent’s stuff—the stacks of boxed seventies clothes and albums he’d called and asked about, that they’d told him to throw out, that he felt *weird* throwing out, like there wouldn’t be anything of theirs *left* in the house if he threw the boxes out—had been pushed off to the side. Billy and Eleven were leaning over a long thin piece of wood trim balanced across the seats of two of the kitchen chairs. Billy had a foot on it, holding it secure across the seats, and Eleven had the saw, which she turned off, and carefully lowered to the floor.

“Angle’s perfect,” Billy told her, thumbing the edge, and she beamed at him. He bent over some more wood, but Steve’s brain was less aware of the wood, and more aware of his boyfriend’s ass in tight jeans.

Steve nearly stepped on Max, watching Billy, then blinked down to realize she was sitting in the doorway with her butt on the kitchen floor and her feet on the stair into the garage, glaring up at him and holding a plastic binder with shiny pages.

“Hey, moron, stop drooling,” she whispered. “It’s nasty.”

“What’re they doing?” he crouched to ask, watching El steeple her fingers thoughtfully at her nose, listening to Billy’s explanation of the different grits of sandpaper.

“He says he *broke your door*,” Max raised her eyebrows with all the judgement of Steve’s second-grade teacher, and he ducked his head.

“Wasn’t on purpose, he thought I was—I don’t know,” he muttered back at her. “He didn’t mean it.”

“That’s creepy, Steve,” she hissed back, flipping a page, and studying it intently. “He knows what he’s doing.” Through the reflection of the florescent lights of the garage, Steve couldn’t see what she was looking at, but he thought he and Max weren’t quite to the point where he could lean into her space.

“I mean,” Steve squinted, considering, and dropped to sit more comfortably next to her in the doorway, his legs sprawled into the garage. He remembered Billy drunk, throwing beer bottles at his house, and crying over his mom. “I mean, not—not always, not really. He, uh—”

“Don’t give me that shit,” she sighed. “Don’t let him get all, y’know, ‘Sorry, honey, you know I’ve got a temper,’ Steve, *jesus*. Bet he never breaks his *own* stuff.”

“Wait, what?” Steve drew his eyes away from Billy, who was smiling down at El marking length on a shorter piece of trim with a steel square. “He doesn’t break my stuff. Except the door. Did he break your stuff?”

She tensed, flipping another page, and holding both sides of the binder with white knuckles. “Maybe. Maybe I’m good at *pattern recognition*, Steve. He tell you not to make him mad? You being *careful*?”

Steve stared at the side of her head, then swung to face her, unable to focus while his eyes were full of Billy’s ass. “Max, you okay? Is—is everything okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” she snorted a laugh, rubbing her eyes with her wrist, and flipping another page. She studied it carefully.

“Max, did—did Billy say that to you? Did he—”

“No, he never—he—*he* says it. To my mom.”

Steve processed for a second, feeling like he was a dysfunctional blender. There were big things floating around out there he was fairly sure he didn't understand, but he could manage the little pieces, sometimes, blend them into a whole that made sense. "Neil told your mom," he translated, and Max swallowed, biting her lips together. "Neil...told your mom not to make him mad. Right?"

She shook her head. "He—he didn't mean—like he gets with Billy. She wouldn't—he wouldn't get mad like *that*—he—just at *Billy*, he wouldn't—he wouldn't—"

"Billy told you what his mom said," Steve felt like his engine was grinding, but he kept guessing, since Max kept pausing after each line. *Maybe she doesn't like what she put together*, he thought. *She's seeing whether I get the same thing*. "That Neil was...that he scared her."

"Billy said he hit his mom," Max grated out, and Steve cocked his head, trying to parse the language of the Hargrove siblings.

"Billy said *his dad hit his mom*," he suggested, his eyes narrowed in thought, and Max made a weird hiccup noise, muffling it in the cuff of her sweatshirt. She closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. Steve bit his lips together, and tried again. "...and his dad told your mom not to make him angry." *Like the Hulk*, he thought, imagining Neil Hargrove tearing the house apart.

Max flipped another page, and bent to frown at it from inches away as Steve waited.

"What have you got there?" he finally asked, since apparently the conversation was over, and El and Billy were still busy. Max tipped the binder towards him with a tense smile.

Steve crouched. "...is that...is that Billy's photo album? That's Billy, oh Jesus. Oh my God." He muffled his wide-eyed mumbling with his hands, staring at child-Billy's round cheeks.

"Shut up, he looks like a moron," Max hissed back, flipping the page, as Billy and Eleven laid out more pieces of wood. "Look at their *hair*! And he definitely doesn't want you seeing him in that sweater

vest.”

Steve flipped it back and eyed the brown, orange, red, and off-white sweater vest—it was definitely ugly, and his time spent winding yarn for Ms. Williams meant he could accurately peg it as basically a sandwich of two enormous crocheted potholders, one front, one back, with straps sewn on. “Oh, god,” he mumbled through his hand. “Did he, like...make that *himself*?” He tried not to think about Neil’s fingers digging into Billy’s shoulder in the posed picture, or the way Billy was leaning away, into his mom.

“I think there was an aunt...or a grandma...Maybe we should blow up that picture and stick it on the bulletin board at school,” Max grinned, laughing shakily.

“Look at his fat little cheeks,” Steve whispered. “Oh no, look, he was surfing and he fell in the water.”

“Look how many pictures there are of him dragging his board out of the water,” Max snickered. “Like, *one* of him actually surfing. He looks like a drowned rat.”

From listening to Billy’s mom, Steve didn’t doubt either that she was as delighted by photos of him falling off surfboards as staying on, or that she ever let him live it down. “His mom calls him her *Land Turtle*,” he told her, and Max clapped a hand over her mouth, muffling a snicker. “Oh no,” Steve hissed, elbowing her. “Look, *Santa* photos.”

Max stared at them for a long moment, then looked up at Steve, biting back a huge grin. Her eyes still shone wet, but she looked *gleeful*. “Steve. Steve,” she whispered in a high voice, drowned out by Billy showing El a box of finishing nails. “Steve,” she wheezed. “He was afraid of Santa. Look. *Every picture*. Oh my god.”

Billy’s mom looked thin, and paler than she had, and Steve tried to focus on her broad grin. “Those are amazing sweaters,” he whispered back, between his fingers, trying not to crack up aloud over toddler-Billy’s horrified eyes on Santa in every picture. In one, he was tilted sideways, *wailing* in his red-and-white striped sweater with the knitted green bowtie and *matching mustard-yellow knitted overalls*.

Suddenly Max yanked the album back to squint close, and Steve waited, then leaned his head down to try and see her face. “Huh,” she said, lifting her head, and pushing the album back toward him. “Leia there on the Halloween page,” she pointed. “His mom—does that—there on her arms, and her neck, do those look like *bruises* to you?”

Steve, staring at what had to be tiny Billy wedged in an awful R2-D2 costume made mostly of tinfoil, beaming up at the Leia from under—for some reason—a superhero-type mask, had to blink a few times to register Max’s voice. “Wha?”

“Do those look like *bruises*,” Max hissed. “Billy says he *used to hit his mom—*”

“Billy hit his mom?” Steve stared at her, then Billy, still stuck in their second conversation about family photos, where four-year-old Billy Hargrove was wearing potholders like they were clothes.

Max shook her head. “No, stupid, *he* hit Billy’s mom, *Neil* did. Billy says. Billy says—Billy says she was scared, she thought—there was an insurance thing—” she swallowed, the shine to her eyes no longer delighted. “I’m—I just—he doesn’t deserve *him*, nobody does, but just ‘cause he hits Billy doesn’t mean he’d hurt—”

Steve listened, really noticing for the first time that Max and Billy never called Neil Hargrove anything—not ‘dad’, or his name, just ‘he’. It was confusing for onlookers, who weren’t always thinking about the man, but Max and Billy always seemed to understand each other.

“I thought I’d check his pictures,” Max closed her eyes, taking a deep breath through her nose, and when she looked back down at the photos, her eyes were drier. “See if—if he was right, and she—she looks—she’s really scared, Steve.”

“I was there when she told Billy,” Steve told Max, who pressed her knuckles to her mouth, making a muffled gulping noise.

“He’s gonna hurt my mom,” she whispered, taking a shaky breath. “Shit, Steve, he’s gonna—he’s gonna hurt my mom, it was true, those

are *bruises*, he's gonna—"

Steve realized the tools had gone silent, and looked up to see Billy, thin-lipped and pink-cheeked, glancing from the album, to Steve, to Max.

El followed his gaze, frowned hard, and sat the saw down. She walked over, and wedged herself between Max and Steve on the stair into the garage. "What happened?" El asked, sounding like she was doing the psychic equivalent of cracking her knuckles to ready herself for a fight.

Max shook her head, pressing her knuckles to her mouth.

Steve let himself be pushed aside, walking over to put an arm around Billy and kiss his ear. "Just found a picture of my new favorite robot," he whispered, and Billy snorted, tense against him. "Why was R2-D2 wearing a mask," Steve asked, and Billy rolled his eyes.

"Shut up, I was like seven, I didn't know how to make a costume. Why the hell is Max showing you my fatass baby pictures?"

"She, um," Steve stumbled, divided between wanting to answer, *not* wanting to admit Max didn't believe Billy's warnings, and mostly wanting a time-travel car to go back and pick up the chubby little curly-haired R2-D2 in his terrible tinfoil costume, give him hot chocolate, and keep him the hell away from Neil Hargrove. "You seriously calling R2-D2 fat?"

"What is going *on*," asked El, narrowing her eyes at Steve's arm around Billy, and tucking her own around Max.

"He hurt Billy's mom, and he hurt Billy, and he's gonna hurt my mom," Max said, her voice gravelly with suppressed tears. "He hurts people, and he's—" she took a few rapid breaths, and bit her lips together until they went white.

Eleven took Max's hand, turning to face her. "We won't let him."

Billy swallowed, his jaw working.

"Hopper," Steve said, squeezing Billy's shoulders. "Hopper can—talk

to Hopper, El, take Max to tell him—”

“He—he could be doing something—I need to get *home*,” Max stood, and nearly fell, trying to spin without watching the stair. She staggered, swearing in a high, broken voice.

Eleven caught her by the elbows. “Max,” she said slowly and clearly, and Max’s head jerked up to frown at her. Eleven waved a hand at the milk crates of old records and *exploded* them.

Billy and Steve both yelled, diving for the floor as vinyl shrapnel rained down, and it snowed bits of cardboard.

“We *won’t let him*,” Eleven said, bringing her hand back to squeeze Max’s, then lifting it to wipe a dribble of blood from her nose.

“Holy shit,” Max whispered, wiping her eyes. “Okay. Yeah. We can—we can threaten him, or something.”

“Or something,” El repeated darkly. “I saw a movie where they dropped a *house* on somebody. Just her *feet* stuck out.”

“C-can you *do that*?” Max snorted wetly, snickering probably half with stress, and half imagining Neil’s shoes sticking out from under a foundation like he was the Wicked Witch of the East.

El narrowed her eyes. “Do you want me to?”

“Holy *shit*,” Max started cackling through her tears, stumbling to sit down on the stair to the kitchen.

“Holy *shit*,” Billy echoed, staring at the mess, as Steve sighed and grabbed the broom. “What the *fuck*,” he whispered. “Luke *fucking* Skywalker.”

Steve had mostly *forgotten* Billy didn’t know about El. *Of course that’s how he’d find out about Eleven*, Steve thought, rubbing his face, and scrabbling at his hair. Billy knew every *other* detail of his stupid life. *Of course he couldn’t find out when she lifted a toy spaceship. No, my boyfriend, that I promised to—to tell things—finds out El can move stuff with her mind when she explodes something four feet away and threatens to drop a house on his dad.* “Babe,” he tried, turning to Billy. “Hey,

dickhead, cupcake.”

Billy was staring at El—or past her, it was hard to tell. His hands were shaking. “You knew about this,” he whispered. “You—you said you wanted me *safe*, and then you sent me out with a—a fucking *dark jedi*. Lucky she didn’t *explode my skull* when I kicked Max under the table. H-holy crap.”

“Shit, no, she—she wouldn’t hurt *you*,” Steve stared at him, then Eleven, who was watching Max take deep, shaky breaths.

“No wonder you wanted to check me over,” Billy whispered, sitting down on one of the chairs he’d been using as a sawhorse. “After you made me take them for waffles. How’d Billy do? She *explode my brain?*”

“No, no—” Steve argued, his stomach clenching as he remembered fearing exactly that, when Eleven climbed into Billy’s car while Dustin and Max drug him into a classroom for their intervention. He reached out, and Billy flinched, then laughed, baring his teeth.

“Any other big secrets, *Steve?*”

“No,” Steve shook his head frantically, hoping there weren’t. He couldn’t think of any, but then he’d never even thought to pull Eleven aside, and *ask* whether he could tell Billy. Some of the vinyl was melted to the floor, and Steve kicked at it, trying to think of what to say.

“Do you want me to come home with you?” Eleven asked Max, and Steve tried to put Billy on hold with his hand and derail *that* situation.

“Wait, no, Eleven,” he called over. “Remember, I mean, you can’t—nobody can see your powers,” he said, wincing as Billy scrambled away. “They could take you away from Hopper, nobody can—”

She nodded. “It would look like an accident.”

Billy staggered over to sit down against the racks holding Steve’s backstock of marshmallows. “Holy hell fucking balls shit,” he mumbled, taking deep breaths in his steepled hands.

"I still need a ride home," Max said grimly, and El nodded, taking a deep breath.

"Wait, wait, wait, no," Steve dropped the broom, waving his hands. "Do you—do you really think you need to do anything, like, *tonight*?"

"He's gonna *hurt my mom*, Steve," Max hissed, and El nodded, crossing her arms.

"Whoa, whoa," Steve waved his hands, glancing at Billy. "I mean, hell with Neil Hargrove, but come up with a plan. What if he tells someone about El? Talk to Hopper, think up—come up with a way that doesn't—I mean, save Max's mom, but make sure *everybody's* safe, okay—"

"Everybody except *him*," Max growled.

El considered Steve for a long moment, then nodded. "I will help you," she told Max, nodding firmly.

"Jesus fucking christ hell," Billy muttered, shoving past Max and out of the garage. His feet pounded up the stairs.

"I need to go *home*," Max told Steve. "I need to *tell* her."

"She's still at work, isn't she?! Don't do anything," Steve ordered the two girls. "*Anything*, I mean it. I have to—Billy didn't know, I need to go and—"

"He didn't know?" El asked, blinking from Steve, to Max, to the ceiling. "Why? You didn't want Billy to know?"

"I didn't know if you'd *want* him to know!" Steve told her, trying not to yell. "Now he's pissed as hell, I have to go talk to him, just—El. Tell me you'd never hurt Billy. You wouldn't hurt him."

Eleven cocked her head, turning to Max. "...what did Billy do?" she asked, and Max gulped a laugh, shaking her head.

"Shit," Steve rubbed his face. "I have to go talk to him, don't *do anything*—"

Max sniffled, rubbing her nose. “You better gimme a ride by five, okay. I—I’ll just have El sh-show me how to use all the power tools. Practice for cutting his head off. *Unsupervised with the power tools*,” she emphasized casually, like a *jackass*, and Steve yelled incoherently and ran upstairs. As he turned onto the landing, he heard the slide lock on Billy’s door catch, and stopped, one foot still in the air. Gravity happened, and he flailed his arms, put both feet on the ground, and turned to lean over the railing, leaning his face in his hands.

“The hell are you doing, Harrington,” Billy’s voice came through the door.

“What?!” Steve yelped, spinning in place. “Nothing! I forgot. I’m sorry.”

“I could hear you chasing me,” Billy said through the door, sounding amused, in the way he did before he set something on fire. “And the floor is creaking. What *now*, Harrington?”

“Uh,” Steve mumbled, grimacing. “You want me to fuck off?”

He could hear Billy take a long breath, and blow air out through his cheeks. “...what do you *want*?”

“I just—” Steve swallowed, dropping to sit on the floor. He took a deep breath to continue. “I just—I’m—shit. I’m so sorry, Jesus. I’m—I can’t—I can’t believe I didn’t ask Eleven if I could tell you. I got...I forgot I didn’t tell you everything.”

“All your little shitheads got superpowers?” Billy asked, laughing. “Yeah. That actually snaps a lot of shit into place, *Steve*.” Steve flinched at his name, and wondered why, swallowing again.

“No,” he answered. “No, it’s, um, it’s just El. She’s, uh. Eleven’s what the lab was *making*,” Steve told him, dropping to press his cheek to the floor, and sigh under the door at Billy’s bare toes clenched in the carpet. “I didn’t—I mean, it wasn’t my secret. We got talked to by the FBI, she—she could get taken away from Hopper, they—”

“Don’t give me that *shit*,” Billy said, dropping to sit crosslegged. His

fingers drummed against the carpet. “Who the hell would I tell. You told me about the—about the goddamn blue bodybuilder bananas. I can—I can still smell the *burning records*, Steve.”

“El hurting you wasn’t—it wasn’t a *plan*,” Steve growled, trying not to yell. “You think—you think I’d get you away from your dad and just—just throw you—why would I want you to *scare a little kid* until she *killed* you, Hargrove, hon—honey mustard. Jesus.”

Through the gap in the door, Steve could see Billy picking at the carpet, and twitching his toes. “...just might blow up my head if I, like, took her by surprise.”

“She wouldn’t *kill you* for startling her,” Steve said, rolling his eyes, then bit his lips as he remembered Dustin talking about El straight-up murdering the people with guns. “She, uh, she’s never hurt anyone...accidentally, um, I don’t think.”

“You *don’t think*,” Billy laughed. “I’m *filled with confidence*.”

“I’m sorry, christ,” Steve whispered. “I didn’t even—”

“Don’t get pissed at *me*—” Billy’s voice cracked, and he kicked the door.

“No, I’m not—” Steve rolled onto his back staring at the ceiling. “Christ. I didn’t...I’m not—I did, I thought about it, I—I should’ve warned you. Kept you away from her. Sorry I—sorry I didn’t—sorry I suck,” he groaned into his hands. “*Damn* it.”

The floor creaked, and Billy’s voice got louder. “God, I’m such a moron,” Billy told Steve, the floor creaking by his door. “All this time, I thought—you didn’t trust me at all, did you. Never forgot I was Billy Fucking Hargrove for a *second*. You just knew little Ellie Hopper didn’t have to tell her *sheriff dad* I needed putting down. She didn’t need help from anybody, she could twist my head off my goddamn neck, right? I step out of line, she’d take *care* of it, right, Steve?”

“Sorry,” Steve said again. “I, um.”

“That’s why you’d let me take Max and her for *waffles*, right, but the

second *Will* shows up you start acting like I'm—I'm the *Zodiac killer*, christ. *Screw you.*"

"I didn't—you're *nice* to El, there was no—"

"Why the fuck have you been pretending to give a *shit* about me," Billy yelled through the door. It shuddered with a loud THUD on the other side, then creaked in its frame as Billy's voice dropped to almost a whisper. "You knew—you *knew* she could do that. You knew she'd—do that—for Max, you—you *knew*—" Steve was silent, grimacing, and wondering what he could say. He jumped as the door thumped again in its frame, and Billy snarled, "Did you *fucking leave*."

"No! I'm—I'm sorry," Steve told him, scooting closer. "I-I'm here, I didn't—you just, uh, you locked the door."

"Like you couldn't bust this shitty lock off in a second. Like Eleven couldn't *rip it off its hinges*, right? Make me fucking bleed from—from the eyes probably," his voice shook with anger, fear, or a combination of both, and Steve didn't point out the door wouldn't protect him.

"What? No, you—you *locked the door*," Steve flailed at it. "If you want me in there, you gotta *open it up*, I—I'm not gonna *break your door down*, I'm not—I'm not the *fucking trespasser* here—I didn't mean that to—shit, forget I said that, don't leave, I'm talking bullshit, tell—tell me what to *do*, Hargrove. Kings have—they have *advisors*, or something, right, tell me—"

"Advisors get *all the goddamn information*," Billy hissed back.

"I'm sorry," Steve said again, groaning. "I'm so fucking sorry, I should—I should have known you—"

"Known I'd *what*, fly off the *fucking handle*?" The door thudded in its frame again, and Steve flinched back. "Right," Billy whispered, "—I'm *crazy*, aren't I, I'm acting *insane* right now, my brain doesn't *fucking work*, I'm stupid, I'm losing my shit over nothing—" Billy's laugh was wetter than Max's.

"No!" Steve squirmed across the floor, closer to Billy's locked door.

“No, not—no, you’re—”

“Am I nuts?” Billy asked, his voice shaking. “Your royal majesty,” he laughed. “G-go on. Tell me to shut up and open the door. Wasn’t to lock *you* out, right? It’s not for that, that’s not—that’s not what you *said to do*—”

The lock clicked, like he had his hand on it, and Steve scabbled at his hair. “N-no, wait, wait. Hargrove. Wait, I don’t—it’s—it’s your room, you can *lock the door*, you can lock it, it’s—it’s okay, you can lock the door—”

“Yell at me some more,” Billy said, laughing unsteadily. “I’ll open it. I’m opening it, *jesus*. Tell me I’m fucking nuts. Tell me to open up, *King Harrington*. I know I’m the asshole, I’m *wrong*, right? I’m—I’m wrong, somehow. Harrington,” he whispered, “—you—you keep—you go through so much shit for me, this is—this is my fault, right, you wouldn’t—”

“No, no, wait, Hargrove, listen—” Steve caught his breath as he recognized the metallic scrape of the lock sliding open. “Stop—”

A loud *thump* rattled the door in its frame. “It wasn’t even a big deal, right, I am, I’m acting *insane*. Jesus, I’m so *dumb* sometimes, I’m *fucking crazy*—I don’t know what to—let’s forget it,” Billy said thickly, turning the doorknob enough to click it unlocked. “Sorry,” he gritted out. “Y-you can come in if you want. We can—”

“No! No, no, no,” Steve yelped, scrambling to lie on his stomach on the floor, and slide his fingers under the door. He held it shut, and stared under the gap at Billy’s feet. “No! Be—don’t try and—babe—shit—you’re mad, you should be mad! You should be *pissed*, okay, be pissed, be—be *fucking pissed* as hell—okay—”

Billy was quiet for several seconds. “...okay,” he repeated softly, sniffing. “Whatcha doing, Harrington...you trying to fit under the door?”

“Fuck you, just—just—lock the door,” Steve told him. “Lock the door, babe. Don’t unlock the door until you wanna let me in, okay. Knight. Remember you’re pissed at me. I’m bullshit sometimes,

okay. You're pissed off."

"Royal command," Billy whispered, dropping so he was lying on the floor, one eye facing Steve through the gap underneath.

"You're supposed to be mad," Steve said again, and Billy laughed, a tear running out the side of his eye and dropping into the carpet. Steve scrambled for words. "I didn't mean—I didn't think—"

"I mean. You usually don't," Billy laughed hoarsely, and Steve wedged more of himself under the door, ignoring it scraping what felt like half the skin off his wrists, to brush the tips of his fingers against Billy's toes. Billy jerked away, then grabbed Steve's fingers in his cold, sweaty ones.

"No, I mean it, I'm a *moron*," Steve hissed, pissed at himself, even if Billy wasn't. "I know—with my *bat*," Steve pointed at Billy under the door, and Billy laughed again. Steve squinted with concentration. "You had to—you had to know all about the bat, so you could figure out whether you were safe. I couldn't just say you were safe. I had to tell you *everything* about the bat, so—so you could—decide."

"Except about El," Billy said, and Steve swallowed.

"Except about El," he agreed, sighing. "I—I almost did, I—you asked if I was gonna lie, she's—it's a big secret—I-I'm sor—I'm so sorry. Honey-mustard. Hargrove. I'm—I'm so *fucking* sorry. I just—there was a lot happening, and—I should have made sure you were okay. First. First before anything."

After what felt like a long silence, when Steve was starting to tense up again, Billy whispered, "You—you said you *fucking forgot*." He rolled onto his back, shaking with laughter. "Did you seriously just—*completely forgot* to tell me. Harrington. You did, didn't you."

"No! No, kind of," Steve groaned again, into his arms, catching Billy's half-hysterical snickering. "I thought—I mean, I freaked out that first time, when Dustin drug me off and you drove off with *El in your car*, but then—I mean, you were okay, nothing happened! I'm a fucking moron—"

"You're so dumb," Billy whispered, grinning under the door. "Holy shit. How could you—okay, I-I'll open the door. I'm opening the door."

"You don't have to," Steve told him, grimacing.

"Can't lock you out in your own house," Billy said, sounding weirdly flat. "S'not what that lock's for, is it. It's not—it's not to st—" he took a shaky breath, swallowing. "It's not to stop *you*," he whispered, his fingers *shaking* in Steve's. "Fuck," he whispered.

"It'll work!" Steve yelled. "It'll stop me, it's a sturdy door, right? The lock's little but um, it's uh, it's latched! You're safe from me in there!"

"Harrington, what are you gonna do when I open this door," Billy asked, and Steve had the horrifying suspicion he was crying. "I won't lock it again, I swear, *jesus*, please," he mumbled, his words hitching, and Steve squeezed his hands harder.

"I—" Steve fumbled his words, trying to think of a way to prove he wasn't *angry*, while also wanting to burn Neil Hargrove at the stake. "I'm not mad," he said, trying to keep his voice soft. "I'm not mad, baby, you can lock the door, you can lock me out anytime—" He'd lost Billy for a while again, he realized, listening to the nonsensical mumbles and apologies on the other side of the door, and running his thumbs over Billy's clenched fingers, so he just kept saying it was okay, and he wasn't mad.

After what felt like the longest eleven minutes of Steve's life—as he talked, he was staring at the watch on his wrist, wedged half under the door—Billy took a long shuddering breath.

"You back with me, Hargrove?" Steve whispered, his throat raw.

"...think so," Billy whispered back. "I was...I was gonna open the door," he said. "I won't lock it again," he promised, and Steve gave his now well-practiced speech.

"You can lock that door anytime," he told Billy. "You can lock it for no reason, okay. I won't be mad, you can lock your door."

"I'm allowed to be crazy," Billy laughed uncertainly.

"I don't know if it's crazy," Steve told him, frowning under the door, but deciding not to bring up Neil Hargrove. "But you can lock the door, people lock doors, that's what locks are for, dick—honey," he said, changing his insult at the last minute, and ignoring Billy's snickers and whispers of "Dick honey! I'm your *dick honey*." "Billy Hargrove," Steve whispered. "You can lock me out, I still love you —"

Billy choked, curling up on the floor around Steve's fingers. "...okay."

"Love you so much," Steve told him, ignoring the heat in his cheeks. "Love works through doors, okay, I can wait 'til you come out, Jesus. It's fine."

"You're such an asshole," Billy laughed, crying. "Fuck you, stop making me—bawl, okay, Jesus, you *prick*, Christ. Fucking...*hate* how much I love you."

"Yeah, I know," Steve laughed, his eyes tearing up with relief, and the pain of his scraped knuckles wedged under the door.

"You're really not...pissed as hell I locked you out," Billy asked again, trying to sound casual.

"I *showed* you that lock," Steve told him, trying not to sound pissed.

"Yeah, because—for if—if *he* comes, you wanna rescue me," Billy laughed. "Protect what's yours. Not supposed to lock *you* out."

Feeling the exhaustion of another trip around the monopoly board, without passing Go, and without collecting \$200, Steve closed his eyes and tried not to groan. "You can lock this door whenever you want," he said for what sounded like the ninetieth time.

"Yeah," Billy breathed, and they lay there, on opposite sides of the door, for nearly another five minutes. "...you pretending not to be pissed," Billy hissed finally. "You—are you—I'll open up and you'll be mad as hell, you—you'll—" he trailed off into sharp breaths, and Steve tried to squirm closer.

"Not gonna lie to you," he said, and felt Billy's fingers twitch. "I'm not, honey-mustard, I'll tell you if I'm mad." Billy took another long shaky breath, and Steve screwed his face up in thought, kicking his feet so they thudded lightly against the railing of the stairs. "...look, I could open the door," he whispered, and Billy was silent. "You already unlocked it," Steve reminded him. "All I'd have to do is turn the knob. But—"

"But what?" Billy asked.

"I don't think you're ready yet," Steve told him. "I'm gonna let you open your door, okay?"

"God, I'm so crazy," Billy sighed, muffled by the carpet.

"I think you're just, y'know," Steve flunked talking as usual, "—you think, um, you think stuff will happen that maybe...happened before. That's, uh, that's smart, actually. That's smart."

"I should trust *you*," Billy groaned. "Shit."

"I mean, I guess," Steve made a face. "I just kind of...fucked up. Big. I didn't—you have to be careful, I mean, you—" he groaned too, trying to fit the words together.

"Not with *you*," Billy argued.

"No, with—with me, too, you have to *be careful*, you're *really important*," Steve huffed, his hackles rising as Billy started laughing again on the other side of the door. "*You are!*" Steve hissed. "You're so important, you're the *most important*, and I'm really—I'm so shitty at this, you have to—you have to help me—"

"Oh my god," Billy wheezed, and Steve opened his mouth to keep arguing, then blinked as Billy reached out to push Steve's pointer finger back under the door.

"This lil' piggy's gonna get stomped, Harrington," Billy whispered through the gap, and Steve snickered as Billy's fingers lifted each of his and prodded them under the door, then stuck his own middle fingers under at Steve.

Steve laughed and rubbed his wrists, rolling onto his back.

Billy's face disappeared from the gap, replaced by his hand, then his foot, and the sound of a door opening across carpet.

Steve pushed himself to his feet, and then got an armful of Billy Hargrove, breathing unsteadily against his shoulder, and yanking at the fly of his pants.

"Fucking moron," Billy whispered, trying to unbutton Steve's jeans as Steve tried to push his hands away.

"Max—Max and El," he gasped. "They're right downstairs, we can't —"

"Sure we can," Billy whispered against his mouth, and Steve grabbed his hands.

"Okay, but I'm the one apologizing, right," Steve changed tactics, trying not to grin. "You didn't screw up. I screwed up." Billy's eyes narrowed, then widened as Steve grabbed him by the fly, whispering. "Lemme choke on your dick." As he'd expected, Billy froze, frowning at him, and Steve seized the opportunity to hug him, squeezing him until his bones creaked.

"Not sure how much you're gonna like that when you're sober," Billy hissed in his ear, rocking their hips together.

With the hot pressure on his dick, Steve couldn't think of an argument other than the truth. "I was," he whispered, sliding a hand under Billy's sweatshirt and up his warm side, feeling his muscles work. "I was—I was sober, cake, um, cake pie. I dumped the whiskey out. Didn't drink it."

"What," Billy asked hoarsely.

"Sorry I lied," Steve buried his face in Billy's neck, dragging messy kisses over his collarbones. "Shouldn't lie to you, I mean it, I—I'll stop, but—but I knew you were freaked, didn't wanna—didn't wanna do some dumb drunk thing—" he bit gently under Billy's jaw, and felt him shudder.

“You goddamn *liar*,” Billy breathed, grabbing the ass of Steve’s jeans with both hands.

“Sorry for that too,” Steve whispered, and Billy groaned melodramatically in his ear. “Am I out of the doghouse?” Steve asked, and Billy snorted.

“No, you are *not*,” Billy said, his gaze flicking uncertainly over Steve’s face. “I’m gonna make you *work* for it—”

“Oh, I can work for it,” Steve told him, his grin way too wide, he suspected, to look seductive at all.

“What the hell are you two *doing* up there?!” Max yelled, and they both started.

“Okay,” Steve said, tucking his laugh against Billy’s neck. “I’m gonna suck your dick. With *feebings*.”

“Jesus christ,” Billy muttered back, relaxing against him. “Just a *minute*,” he shouted downstairs, and Max stomped away. “...El might actually come up and ask what we’re *doing* in a minute,” he groaned, sliding his arms around Steve’s waist to sway together, and muttering a string of profanity into his shoulder.

Steve rubbed his back, trying to remember the intense cold-shower effect El had had on his half-chub earlier, when she’d stomped into the locker room wanting Billy to teach Max to use tools. The idea of her throwing the bedroom door open as Steve tried to negotiate his first real blowjob didn’t sound appealing.

After standing there a while, Steve’s adrenaline bubble started merging with the relief of Billy choosing to trust him after he’d fucked up *again*, and he wanted to *move*—run, or dance Billy around, or carry him somewhere, listening to him yell, and kissing his hot blushing face. “Later tonight. I got blowjob tips from Nancy. But we should probably go back downstairs,” he whispered, rubbing his thumb across Billy’s tear-sticky cheek.

“Holy Jesus. Is that—is that what you were talking about? Giving *blowjobs*?” Billy asked, his laugh warming Steve’s neck.

“Sort of,” Steve hedged, wishing Nancy hadn’t wanted him to keep secrets. “She decided to start telling me all the weird shit she used to tell Barb, and I’m not supposed to tell anybody, and—” he remembered Nancy shaking with laughter over Jonathan’s sex habits, and tried to smother his vindictive glee, “—I really, really want to tell you Nancy’s secrets, I swear.”

“Why the hell would I want to know any of that,” Billy asked, slumping against him with a contented sigh.

“It’s *hilarious*,” Steve hissed. “Being friends with a girl is *annoying*.”

“You poor baby,” Billy snorted.

“She wants to *check in* all the time! She likes you,” Steve said, remembering abruptly, and Billy burst into a fit of snickering against his neck.

“She does, huh.”

“She does! She said you were all freaked out when I ran out of the library.”

“...Harrington,” Billy said, pulling back to narrow his eyes at Steve’s face. “I—”

“We should probably go downstairs,” Steve interrupted, his face heating as he remembered Billy *knew* he’d run off to cry. *Like the five-year-old birthday boy*, he thought, with a self-directed smirk, *when he realizes everybody in the class just came because he’s got a pool*. “Sorry I was acting like—an idiot. More of an idiot,” Steve shrugged. “We should go down.”

Billy opened his mouth, closed it, then pulled Steve’s face into a kiss that was warm and salty with tears. After a few seconds of hot breath and slick tongue that left Steve harder in his pants than ever, his sweaty hands clutching at Billy’s biceps, Billy pulled back. “You saying I should stop hiding from a little girl,” he asked, grinning, and Steve swallowed a couple times, gathering himself to speak.

“El’s pretty scary,” Steve rasped, “—they’re gonna start using the chainsaw or something, though—”

“You have a *chainsaw*?” Billy interrupted.

“Maybe?!” Steve stepped back to throw his hands in the air. “I didn’t know we had a circular saw!”

“We need a ride,” El’s voice carried up the stairs.

“Are your—” *parents*? Steve thought, and stalled out, “—are your uh, your adults even off work yet? Thought you were helping Billy fix my door,” Steve called back, leaning over the railing to look downstairs, and reaching back to squeeze Billy’s hand.

“...we should finish that first,” El said, after a second, and Billy turned him around and leaned in for one more kiss before squeezing his hand back and pulling away to jog down the stairs after Eleven.

Max was waiting at the foot of the stairs when Steve came down. She looked him up and down, then rolled her eyes, her shoulders lowering a little from their angry hunch.

“Hey, Max, uh,” Steve said, then stopped, thinking.

“What? Did you run out of batteries?” she asked, dryly.

“No, shut up. You know—you can still bring your mom here, if you need to, ever. Or call us, if you need help. We can—we can come pick you up, you and her. Anytime.”

“...Billy gonna second that?” she asked, and Steve considered.

“Yeah. Yeah, he said he’d help me out if my kids needed it. He *offered*. I mean, he might not stand between you and his *dad*—”

“No, he’s—he’s done that. Done something just as—just as I was—got himself *hit*.”

“...that’s...” Steve trailed off, unable to say it was *good*, Billy getting himself hurt.

“*Weird* is what that was, because usually he’s a total *shithead*,” Max hissed. “Which I didn’t tell *El*. And I *won’t*—” She stopped.

Because he's your brother, Steve thought, then wondered whether it was just basic decency in Max, not wanting to hurt *anyone* if she could help it. Anyone but monsters, like Neil Hargrove.

"...El wants you both to come to the Byers' for waffles," she reported, sighing. "Soon. Every damn time anybody's upset she wants waffles."

"D'you want him there?" Steve asked, suspecting she didn't.

"I don't care," Max sighed, setting her jaw, and frowning towards the garage. "If he keeps acting like a goddamn human being instead of an asshole. I think El wants to ask him about his mom."

That will go great, Steve thought, wincing.

"Guess I better help them fix the door," Max said, unmoving.

"You didn't break it," Steve told her, wandering over to the hot chocolate cupboard.

"I wanted to see his photo albums. Check his story, you know, so I lied," she said, "...kind of."

"You...lied," he glanced back, eyebrows raised, before realizing he needed to get more marshmallows out of the garage, which would mean walking out on Max wanting to talk, which...didn't seem like the right thing to do. He sighed.

"He won't let me take shop. I signed up for *shop* and now I'm in *home economics*," Max groaned, and Steve rewound the sentence in his head and substituted *Neil* in for *he*. "I told El, and said I wanted to talk to Billy, and she said Billy takes shop, since he's a *boy*—and next thing I know, he's waiting for us in your *car* after school. Trying to tell me how to use a *saw*. Billy *fucking* Hargrove, Shop Teacher—and of course Eleven's having *fun*." She squinted towards the garage. "I just wanted to see that photo album."

"...want some hot chocolate?" Steve asked, feeling a keen empathy for El, and her urge to stuff waffles in the face of anyone having a problem.

“No,” Max said, burying her face in her arms. “Yeah. *Damn* it. Do I have to—I have to stop hating him now?! Just like that?” She snapped in the air, growling. “Because that *asshole’s* been beating his face in since he was like—” she held her hand flat a couple feet from the floor, glaring at Steve. “—that high? How come my mom had to fall for *him*. How come *he* can’t die of a heart attack. HEY MISTER GOD, THIS IS MAX,” she yelled suddenly, at the ceiling. “FIX YOUR SHIT.”

Steve was cracking up, leaning against the cupboard. “You tell him,” he held up a mug in a toast, and Max snorted.

“Listen to him in there,” she said, glaring at the table, and Steve leaned to listen to Billy laughing, and explaining something about the latch. “Being some rad older brother. You know, that’s what I thought *I* was getting. Will Byers *loves* him, musta asked me to invite him like twelve times. He got a *cat* out of a *fucking tree*, Steve, did he get *brain trauma* on your watch?!”

Steve thought about how tense Billy’d been, the afternoon Max had come over to learn to bake bread. Neil hadn’t *helped*, that morning, or calling that night, but Billy’d been a mass of barbed wire all afternoon.

“You finding the meaning of life in that cocoa mix?” Max asked, and Steve jumped, realizing he was staring into the jar.

“Yeah, kinda,” he leaned to look deeper, humming exaggerated noises like a Muppet, and she snorted, watching him spoon mix into mugs. “Nah. I, uh, I think he...I think maybe you make him nervous.”

“I make *him* nervous?!” Max smacked her hands on the table. “I make *him* nervous?! What in the hell kind of—”

“No, shush, I just mean—like I remember the floaty thingies, in the tunnels, you know,” he told her, wagging his fingers to indicate the wispy substance that had clogged their lungs, and ignoring Max biting back a grin. “In the snow, I—I can freak out a little. It’s not—it’s not the snow’s fault, snow never ate my friends—” Max snorted another laugh, but she was listening. “You haven’t...done anything,

but you were—you were there, while things were happening, I think —”

“I remind him of home,” she said, chewing her lip. “Maybe. Gross.”

“Maybe,” he shrugged, but when he glanced over again, she looked like she was thinking hard.

“He could still *not* be a dipshit,” she muttered at her mug, and Steve nodded, sighing.

“You—you can bring him for waffles,” she decided. “Will can just *have* him, I don’t care. He can be Will and Eleven’s brother, I don’t give a *shit*.”

Steve opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again. “I’m, uh, I’m pretty good at. Things.”

“Not *English*, apparently,” Max narrowed her eyes. “The hell does that mean?”

“Nothing,” he shrugged, turning back to turn off the kettle, and add the hot water to their mugs.

“You really want to be my brother?” she asked, sounding amused, and he turned to glare, but her eyes were kinda wider than her usual wary glower. “I mean, you—you said that, when you—when you wanted me to get him out of the house, but—”

“I’d be better at it than *Billy*,” he pointed out, and she tried to talk and laugh at the same time, and choked.

“Yeah,” she laughed, wiping her eyes. “Yeah, uh, you—you really would. Uh. I dunno. Do I really *need* a brother, right, I mean. I, um. I have some—friends. Now.”

“If you need one,” he said, keeping his tone cheerful, and ignoring her red face as she groaned into her sleeves. “Or just, y’know, want one. I can put Dustin down as a reference.” He turned back to the hot chocolate.

He gave Max the rest of the marshmallows, and sat her mug in front

of her, watching her eyes well up as she looked at the little Garfield cartoon about spiders on the mug.

“Thanks, Steve,” she rasped, and he clinked their mugs together.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you so much for wandering in! Lemme know if you liked my story--I lovelovelove hearing from people! Kudos! Short comments! Long comments! Questions! Constructive criticism! Comments as extra kudos! Thanks so, so much! XD

(I try to reply to each one, but if you don't want a response to your comment then please say "No reply please" or "Whisper" so I'll know not to reply.)

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12. Steve hears some things he needs to, and some things he isn't meant to, or: The Byers House Has Thin Walls

Summary for the Chapter:

Billy realizes Steve needs help too, and promises to give it to him. Also: WAFFLES

Notes for the Chapter:

Billy gets all up Steve's face about Max, but Steve talks him down, fyi

Max and Steve drank their hot chocolate in silence before wandering back to the garage, where El and Billy were applying the last licks of paint to the trim.

"We'll need to come back," El said, putting her hands on her hips, and frowning from the trim, to Max, to Steve.

"Guess it's a real shop class then," said Max, stalking over to carry the painted pieces carefully out of the way. "Except El's *allowed* to take shop already." She grinned between El and Billy, and Steve stepped closer, sensing a trap as her smirk widened. "Maybe instead of shop, Billy should teach El home-ec. *Billy* knows how to *cook*."

Billy stared at her, frowning warily, but El shrugged.

"All I need to know how to cook are waffles," she told Steve, who snorted, coughing and tasting sawdust. He thought hard, watching Max and her brother work shoulder-to-shoulder as though they were used to it. The sander filled the garage with its grating roar, and El plugged her ears.

When it was done, Steve was ready. "What about what goes *on* the waffles," he asked triumphantly. "I bet you don't know how to make...those things. You and Max could come over and we could make *waffley* things."

El froze, then cocked her head, eyes narrowed. "...IHOP things?"

Steve nodded, confident. "He's good at *everything*."

There was a clatter as Billy dropped the board he was holding, and he and Max whispered furious insults at each other as they got it back in place. Billy turned to stare over, his cheeks red, and his smile strained but present. "Why the hell you telling this girl I'm some kind of...jam expert," he asked, as Max glared up at him.

"When the hell you been making *jam*?" she hissed. "I never saw you make *jam*."

"It's fine," Steve waved his hands. "We can ask Ms. Williams to supervise. And like—whipped cream. I bet he can make whipped cream," he suggested daringly, only to look over to see Billy looking deeply unimpressed.

"Yeah, anyone can *whip cream*, Harrington, glad you got such high estimation of my—"

Eleven stood as though struck. "You can *make* those things?"

"Don't you think *Max and Eleven* should come over, and we can have waffles?" Steve asked Billy, widening his eyes, and trying to send *yes, Billy, say yes*, telepathically.

Max rolled her eyes and focused her glower back on the edge she was sanding. "You know it'll happen now Steve mentioned waffles. Can we play your Atari?"

Billy stared down at her head, flicking a weirded-out glance at Steve. "Y-yeah, we can...get some fruit, or something. I can...figure out jam," he told her, nudging Max with his elbow. She nudged him back with her shoulder, and he shook his head, smiling uncertainly at Steve.

"Oh. And they want us to come for waffles," Steve told him. "At the Byers'."

Billy blinked. "Will's house?"

"Tomorrow. Will must have told us to ask you, like, ninety times," Max bit out, rolling her eyes. "He's gonna cling like a koala. He's gonna clamp onto your leg."

It should have been a cute thought, and Steve smiled, but Billy's shoulders clenched, and he stalked off to clatter around in the corner with the skis. Max glared after him, biting her lips, and then kicked the sawhorse, twice.

El blinked between them. "...but you *like* Will? Don't you like Will?"

She looked *betrayed*, and Steve couldn't help laughing.

Neither could Max. She grinned a little sardonically at El. "I like Will fine. Everybody likes Will." She stuck her hands in her back pockets, sighing. "...just...glad my *big brother* found a kid he *likes*, I guess. *Great*, right? Just too bad I couldn't deliver."

"Oh!" El said, and turned a glare on Billy too, and Steve winced, stepping forward, just as Billy turned the Shopvac on and the noise drowned everything out. He wandered back over, vacuuming carefully all around the sander and the sawhorses. He ran the wand over the wood as he brushed it with a dry paintbrush.

He was pretty obviously taking way too long, and finally Max grabbed El's hand and drug her up into the entryway.

Max cleared her throat. "I—I gotta talk to my mom. Tonight."

"I'll go with you," El offered, but Max shook her head. Billy finally switched the vacuum off, and Steve resisted the urge to just walk over and hug him, or smack his ass.

"No, I just—I just need to—tell her. I don't—" Max said, taking a deep, shaky breath. "I don't know—we can't—I don't know what—"

"If you need anything," Steve said lamely, then steadier, "—if—you could stay in my room. If she—if you need somewhere to um, to go —"

"*Your* room," Billy repeated, squinting at him, while El nodded.

“We can help you move out,” she told Max, who laughed.

“My mom’s not just going to leave,” she said hoarsely. “M-maybe she’ll listen, maybe—maybe we could go—we could stay with Grammie a while and—and that would—” she stopped, pinching the bridge of her nose, and taking a deep breath, before looking back up with dry eyes. “I—maybe. I have to—I have to *try* and tell her.”

“Sure,” Billy sighed, his mouth quirked.

“I can help too,” El said again, her voice smaller, and Max reached over and squeezed her hand.

“Yeah. Thanks, El. I—I need a ride home, it’s almost five—”

“Yeah, okay,” Steve nodded.

“Bring her here, and make Steve stay in my room,” Billy said, smirking at Max, and she relaxed a little as she shuddered, making a face.

“Ew! Eugh. You’re so nasty—” the rest got muffled as El hugged her, and Max froze, then cautiously hugged her back.

Billy snorted, squinting at them, opened his mouth, and glanced at Steve before closing it. He sighed. “...Steve can drop you off. I’ll clean up here.”

When Steve got back, he yelled for Billy, and didn’t hear anything. There wasn’t a lit cigarette glowing out by the pool, and Billy’s bedroom and bathroom doors were wide open, so Steve prowled around the house a few times before going in and trying his walkie-talkie—but it buzzed from Billy’s room, so he tossed it on the mattress in Will’s fort in the front room, and followed it, burying his head in the comforter.

He could only groan into the comforter so long, so he got his homework out, sat for a while staring at it, and put it away. He went to clean up the garage, and Billy already had—the remaining box of Steve’s mom’s stuff was moved to a shelf, and all the sawdust had

been swept away. Billy'd moved his car back inside, and left a clear space for Steve's, and Steve sighed, and grabbed a couple bags of marshmallows to restock the only cupboard he used. After a few episodes of reruns in space, he turned off Kirk and Spock and muttered every swear word he knew into the pillows in the fort. "Where the fuck *are* you," he asked the Christmas lights, staring up, and hoping Billy wasn't just...in the snow, somewhere. He took a deep breath, and then another, his eyes stinging.

His stomach growled.

He opened the fridge and frowned in, sighing at the tubs of things like margarine, and sour cream, that he couldn't just *eat*.

He swiveled to study the coats by the door, trying to decide whether Billy *had* one, then just grabbed one, and a scarf and hat, and hauled the armload out and around. "Where's my knight," he called softly.

In the darkness, Billy snorted. "My king," he slurred. "He calls for aid?" he mumbled, and Steve reached towards his voice and yanked him close by the sweatshirt, pulling him into a kiss that tasted like 120 proof sawdust. "Jesus," he whispered against Billy's mustache, leaning in for another taste. "You suck down a whole fifth of whiskey as soon as I drove off?"

"Shut up," Billy hissed, shoving away, and Steve followed, following the sloshing noise of a bottle.

"You coming back in?"

"Fuck off," Billy's footsteps crunched away through the snow, and Steve stopped.

"Uh, I brought you a coat. And stuff."

"Fuck off," Billy hissed, unevenly, Steve thought, and he stood for a second, wondering whether this was a time to obey, or whether he should think harder, like usual.

"Um," he cleared his throat, grimacing. "Uh, just if you're gonna stay out, put a coat on, here."

“Harrington—” Billy snarled, crunching toward him in the snow, and Steve bit his lips together.

“Okay,” he told the angry voice in the dark, “I’ll go, I’ll go, just—just take the coat, okay, just—”

“Give it to me, you fucking sheepdog,” Billy’s hand brushed his arm, then grabbed the coat, and Steve stepped back. “I’ll wear the damn coat, I won’t fall in the damn pool, go watch a *fucking* musical.”

“Yeah, okay,” Steve laughed, and let his eyes close for a second to take a few deep, easy breaths. “Okay, I’m—I’m going,” he called over his shoulder, turning back to the house, and rubbing his hands to warm them.

“She’s a little *bitch*,” Billy yelled, and Steve stopped.

“What?”

“Why the fuck you want me hanging around my *step-* sister, Harrington?” Billy called, laughing. “You know she shot me up with that shit. I coulda *died*. Now you want us to make *nice*?”

“She’s...your sister,” Steve said, feeling wrong-footed. “...you can’t —”

“I can’t what?” Billy asked, the snow crunching under his feet as he stepped up to breathe smoke and whiskey in Steve’s face. “Can’t hate her? Can’t wish she’d *fucking die*?”

“You don’t wish she’d *die*,” Steve told him, sighing. “You can’t—”

“Oh, I can,” Billy said, laughing. “I can, Your Majesty. I’m not—”

“Stop it,” Steve argued. “You *don’t*—”

“You think?” Billy asked, in the slow, smiley way he’d had right before walking into the Byers’ house, and attacking Lucas for no reason. “You think I don’t hate her?”

Steve reached out in the dark until he found Billy’s chest. “Put your damn coat on. I think...” he trailed off, trying to figure it out, as

Billy waited, shivering against his hand. Steve tried to imagine what it would have been like, thinking your mom had left, living with Neil Hargrove. He got a handful of sweatshirt and yanked Billy closer, imagining him coming home every day to Neil yelling, or—or yanking him around, or *hitting* him—“Bi—Billiam,” he stumbled, avoiding Billy’s name, and Billy snorted a laugh. “...does, um. Does your dad hit Max?”

“Why the fuck would he hit *Max*,” Billy growled back.

“Why the fuck would he hit *you*,” Steve hissed, shaking him, but bit his lip, breathing Billy’s breath, and feeling him tremble. “He didn’t hit Max, did he.”

“Fuck you,” Billy spat back, sounding a little choked.

“He brought a kid home he didn’t hit,” Steve whispered, and Billy shoved him off.

“Fuck you!”

“He’s nice to her, isn’t he,” Steve thought aloud, blowing into his cupped fingers. “Because of her mom—”

“He’s not *nice* to her,” Billy gritted out. “He treats her like *shit*, he wants her to—he thinks he needs to *fix* her with a *strong father figure*,” he said, snorting.

“He doesn’t hit her, though, I bet,” Steve pressed, and Billy laughed.

“Fuck you,” he said again, lighting another cigarette.

“He knows his last wife left him, and he doesn’t wanna piss this one off too much—” Steve muttered, steepling his hands to think. Billy laughed roughly, his voice shaking with the cold, and Steve sighed. “Put the coat on, trespasser. ...he knows he can’t hurt Max or her mom, right,” Steve whispered, putting it together, “—so he takes it out on you. Whenever he’s pissed—”

“He’s not like that,” Billy hissed back. “I don’t know what the fuck you’re thinking, but he’s not—it’s—it’s not—”

"Yeah, he *is*," Steve shot back. "Good dads don't fucking hit kids." Billy took a shaky breath, and Steve crunched a couple steps closer to where the orange light of his cigarette lit his face and curls as he inhaled. "...you don't hate Max," Steve said again, gaining confidence. "You like her too—"

"I don't give a *shit*—" Billy growled.

"You're jealous as hell," Steve decided. "She moved here and she had like five friends in a *day*. I *fought* for her, I fought *you*."

"Yeah, we all know who you're gonna pick," Billy said, turning away with a jagged laugh. "I see you testing me out. Shit. Screw *you*, Harrington, I can keep it up, *jesus*. I can *do* this, okay."

"...what," Steve asked, caught off-balance.

"Making sure I know my place," Billy whispered. "I get it, Harrington. I get to stay if I can *behave*."

"Shit, is that what your dad did?!" Steve burst out. "What a *shithead*, what'd he do, say he'd throw you out?"

"...nah," Billy said, but he let Steve get close again, so Steve could see his eyes, resigned in the warm glow of the cigarette. "That's you."

"I won't—" Steve protested, grimacing.

"Dad wants me home," Billy said, laughing. "Says I'm *his* problem."

"You're not a *problem*," Steve told him stoutly, and Billy laughed.

"Yeah, I am—"

"Sometimes you are," Steve agreed, stomping his feet to warm up. "Sometimes *everybody* is though, I mean. You're not—you're more than a *problem*, you're—" he waved his hands in frustration, then grabbed Billy's forearms. "You're *Billy*."

"Yeah, that's the problem," Billy said, laughing, but his smile looked softer. "Right there."

“Not a problem,” Steve said nonsensically. “You’re *not*. You—”

“You keep saying he hits *kids*,” Billy said, leaning closer, and breathing smoke out over the dim orangey light like a dragon. The smoke whorled around Billy’s hands, and Steve’s, holding his wrists. “He doesn’t hit *kids*, Harrington, he only ever hit *me*—”

“You were a kid,” Steve shot back, shaking Billy, ineffectively, by his forearms. “You—you’re *his kid*. He hits *you*.”

“Doesn’t hit Max,” Billy whispered. “Problem is *me*, Harrington—”

“No,” Steve shook him again, leaning close enough their arms were pressed between them. “Your dad’s an asshole, that’s the—”

“Fucking...hate a little girl,” Billy said, looking down, then up again, deep into Steve’s eyes. “Little—fucking—skateboarder—girl, Your Lordship. I *wish* she got hit.” He said it again, slower. “I *wish he hurt her*. That fucked up enough? I wish he fucking—grabbed *her* hair and held her face down next to the stove burner. ‘M’I still not the problem?” He laughed at Steve’s expression, and Steve wondered what it looked like.

“B—Knight,” Steve interrupted, but he didn’t have a good answer, so Billy grinned like a carnivore, and kept going.

“When I can’t breathe I wish he’d hurt her instead,” Billy whispered, yanking his arms free of Steve’s hold, and stepped back. “You can tell she doesn’t have any *fucking* idea what to do,” he rasped. “Just standing there watching, trying to get him to *stop*, even, and I’m thinking *I wish it was her*.”

“Jesus,” Steve breathed, trying to keep track of Billy’s shape when he turned away, his body hiding the glow of the cigarette.

“Starting to see the *cracks*, finally?” Billy called back, laughing, and Steve jumped, squinting back into the darkness. “I see her there and I want *her* to hurt—”

“Or wishing he’d stop hurting *you*, maybe,” Steve suggested.

“Yeah, that’s what I should be hoping, isn’t it,” Billy laughed

raggedly. “What the fuck kinda monster watches her run off and wishes *she* was drowning too?”

“No, you don’t,” Steve argued, grabbing Billy’s arm to yank him around, to see his face, and Billy shoved him. Steve stumbled backwards in the snow and fell on his ass, the cement around the pool jarring every bone in his body through the hard-packed snow of their footprints.

“Fuck,” Billy whispered, dropping next to him, and patting at him clumsily in the dark. “Shit, Harrington, go—go back inside. I’m the *fucking problem*, Harrington, *me*— not my *dad*, not *Max*—” he cut off with a groan, shoving away again and stalking off.

“Stop,” Steve said breathlessly, pushing himself back up to his feet to follow, and Billy laughed again.

“Stop,” Billy whined.

“B- *babe*,” Steve gritted out, stomping after him. “*Quit* it, *jesus*.”

“Waaah, is the truth *scary*, Your Majesty?” Billy asked, half crying, half laughing as he staggered to a stop, grabbing a scrubby tree for balance, silhouetted against the light of the house. “*Stop* it,” he mimicked, like Steve was a whiny toddler. “Ennnh, *fucking baby*—you seeing the *cracks*, now?”

“What?!”

“Been spackling them over,” Billy laughed. “Gotta keep it together. Smooth surface for Steve, right? Fill those *cracks* in. Sand ‘em over, long as you—long as you don’t look close. Just—I’ve just been *hiding the cracks*, Harrington, you gotta—you gotta hide the cracks. But I—I can’t—can’t hide where...Max is,” he laughed, but it sounded harsh. “That crack’s too big, y’know? Can’t shovel enough in there, you *see* it, right? You *see* now, what I’m *like*.”

Steve waited, squinting into the darkness. “Uh,” he said, into the silence. “...I know you’re—”

“Dirt gets in my cracks,” Billy whispered, from less than a yard away, and Steve startled again. “Rots in there. All the broken places.

Gathers flies and—and maggots—” he trailed off, laughing the kind of laugh that you had to listen carefully to to tell whether it was tears.

“Um,” Steve cut him off, and Billy paused, breathing in wet pants. Steve bit his lip, thinking. “Like...fruit?” he finally asked, into the silence, and Billy *cracked up* laughing.

“Yeah, your majesty,” he finally answered. “You’re right, I’m a fruit! All rotten in the bruised places—I’m a fag, I’m a—I’m a *fucking*—”

“Shut *up*, that’s *dumb*,” Steve gritted out. “You—you’re not—you’re a—you’re my *goddamn boyfriend*, not an *apple*.”

“You *saw*, you can *fucking see it now*, I know you—”

“No, listen, shut up,” Steve hissed, putting his hands in his pockets so he wouldn’t grab his drunk idiot and *shake* him. “Listen. Listen. Apples bruise, okay, they rot, they do that, yeah. *People*,” he stepped closer, “—people—I’m going in, I swear, I’ll go inside, but listen—people *heal*, okay. You’re bruised, yeah, you—” he whispered, but he couldn’t take Billy’s silence, and put a hand out to find his stubbly face, rubbing his thumb over skin sticky with tears. “He bruised you. Maybe—maybe he *cracked* you, I don’t know—”

Billy leaned into his hand, and took a shaky breath.

“You’re not a *banana*,” Steve growled. “You—you’re not gonna turn black and *rot away* ‘cause he slammed you around, okay, you’re not —”

“It’s *inside*,” Billy whispered. “S’not—s’nothing he *did*, I’m just—”

Steve opened his mouth, closed it, and then smiled slowly, feeling like the Grinch when he had a wonderful, awful idea. “Hey,” he leaned in close. “You saying your mom is bad at makin’ babies?”

“No!” Billy said instantly, and Steve resisted a victorious snort.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “She’d beat you up. She’s a good mom, right?”

Billy growled and bit lightly at his hand, and Steve grabbed his face,

ignoring Billy's snickering, and the tongue licking his fingers.

He stroked Billy's cheeks. "She's a good mom, and she made a good kid, right?"

Billy shoved him away again. "...shut your damn face, Harrington."

"Yeah," Steve nodded, listening to him crunch through the snow, and squinting towards his voice. Steve sighed, and turned back towards the door. "If you're bruised, it's his fault!" he yelled back, and then nearly fell on his ass, flailing his arms, as a snowball swiped his head.

Billy was still laughing as Steve stomped the snow off his feet, and closed the back door.

He boiled water, measured out ingredients, unwrapped candy canes, made hot chocolate, and cracked the window, only to hear a thin "PISS OFF, HARRINGTON" from the treeline. He closed it again.

Steve waited *hours*, then finally stepped out the back door and *yelled* as he was grabbed by a *black shape* leaning over the edge of the porch. Only the smell of cigarettes and whiskey kept him from punching Billy's face. Steve just leaned into him, his heart thumping with adrenaline. "Jesus," he whispered, pulling his half-frozen boyfriend closer.

"...fuck took you *so long*," Billy slurred, and Steve grabbed him and shoved him inside, pulling a blanket off the couch and wrapping him up. Billy curled easily against him, and Steve let them both drop onto the couch with a sigh, and wrapped his dumb blanketed boyfriend up in his arms.

"Whaddaya mean it *took me so long*," Steve growled. "You told me not to go out there!"

"Yeah, but you don' listen," Billy mumbled into his shirt, and Steve sighed.

"You waiting for invitations now, trespasser?" he asked, and Billy

squirmed closer.

“Still came an’ got me.”

“Don’t *wait* for that,” Steve told him, rubbing his back as he started to shiver. “Come in when you get cold, shithead.”

“Mmmm,” Billy laughed, warm against his neck. “Maybe you thought ‘b-bout it a little more,” he slurred.

“No, *listen*,” Steve told him, shaking him gently. “What if I’d fallen *asleep*, babe. What if I *went* somewhere.”

“Mmmn,” Billy shook his head, nuzzling deeper in the blankets, and Steve took a deep breath, and manhandled his drunk slug of a boyfriend until he could cup his face.

“Billy,” he whispered, and Billy swallowed, trying to squirm away. “No, ssh, c’mere, Billy Hargrove.”

“...listening,” Billy sighed, his mouth quirked, but his eyes fixed blearily on Steve’s face.

“Need you to promise,” Steve told him, and Billy nodded vaguely. “No, Billy, listen. You’re in trouble, so I’m calling you Billy.”

Billy frowned, biting his lips together.

Steve kissed them. “I—I love you. I got *feeblyings*, right? So—so, you uh, you have to be nicer to me, okay?” Billy burst out laughing, and Steve felt himself flush. “Billy,” he whispered again.

“What happens when I’m in trouble with Steve Harrington,” Billy whispered back, smiling. He was starting to shiver, and Steve stroked his hands over his boyfriend’s cold face, and neck, and frozen-feeling ears.

“We have to talk like this,” Steve told him, leaning in to press another kiss to Billy’s freezing-cold lips, and pulling back as Billy tried to deepen it. “Pay attention, babe. Trespasser.”

“Okay,” Billy nodded, licking his lips.

“You have to—you gotta come in when you’re cold, okay? You gotta come in out of the cold.”

“You come back,” Billy whispered, holding his freezing-cold hands over Steve’s on either side of his face.

“Yeah, I-I will, I’ll come get you,” Steve agreed, adjusting his hands on Billy’s face to cover more cold skin. “But—” he took a shaky breath, “—you have to *promise*—”

“You’ll come back,” Billy said again, frowning. “You—you gonna...stop coming? Harrington?” He laughed, an explosion of whiskey and smoke, and Steve made a face.

“I’m not gonna—that’s what I’m *saying*,” Steve hissed. “You can’t just...you...”

“I’m gonna wait,” Billy whispered, his eyes bleary with whiskey. “Wait for you. You gotta come get me. You don’t...” he took a wet, shaky breath, swallowing hard, “—you don’t want me anymore, don’t come get me. You get...done. If—if you’re done. With me.”

“What if I have to take a shit,” Steve said, shaking him a little. “What if—what if I eat two-week old Chinese food, and I shit for two hours, and you *die*, Bi—babe, what if you *freeze to death*—”

“That’s half a month,” Billy slurred, frowning at him. He squeezed Steve’s hands, turning his head to kiss Steve’s thumb. “Don’t eat that.”

“What if I fall asleep,” Steve whispered, starting to shake a little himself. His eyes blurred with tears, and he blinked them away. “What if I go to sleep and you go have a smoke and you *don’t come back* because you’re waiting for me to get up and get you. I gotta get up and check to see if you’re alive? I—I can’t sleep when you aren’t *next to me?! I can’t sleep* because you might *fucking die?!?*”

“No! No,” Billy shook his head, wide-eyed, and yanked Steve closer, yanking the blanket around both of them. “Sorry. Sorry, shit. Sorry.”

“Come in when it’s cold,” Steve said again, into the cold bulk of Billy’s

shoulder, trying to sound stern, but his voice cracked and wobbled. "I—I can't—you gotta—Billy, you *gotta come in*—"

"I will, I will," Billy muttered, wrapping both shivering arms around him, and squeezing until Steve's bones felt like they creaked together. Steve breathed against Billy's shoulder, smelling snow, and cigarettes, and he turned his head to breathe against the damp skin of Billy's neck. Billy kissed his head. "...I'll come in, okay. Harrington. You can sleep."

"I—I'll just come get you," Steve mumbled, pretty certain he'd be staring at the ceiling and jumping at imagined noises anyway, and Billy groaned into his hair. "I'll stay up for you—"

"...shit, no. Fuck. You—you're right. Not on you if I'm dumb. I *promise*," he said, pushing Steve away—he struggled, hanging on—so his still-shivering hands could cup Steve's face, and Billy could look as serious as possible, drunk as hell. "Harrington," he whispered. "Stevie."

Steve laughed, startled, as his face heated. "Nobody calls me that," he whispered back, starting to snicker, and trying to duck his head.

"Stevie," Billy said, squeezing Steve's cheeks with a frown. Steve tried to laugh through fishlips, and Billy smirked. "Listen," he said, and Steve nodded, blinking rapidly to try and get his eyes to clear. "'m gonna be more...careful, okay," Billy said softly. "I'll—I'll do better, okay, I'll be good. You don't—you don't have to—babysit me, okay."

"M'a goo'babys'tr," Steve mumbled, trying to talk through his squished lips.

"Gonna help you with that," Billy sighed. "With me. Gonna help you make everybody safe, okay? You don't have to."

"...okay," Steve nodded, watching his face.

"Don't have to babysit me," Billy repeated. "I'll babysit me."

"...you're sure," Steve pressed, laughing, so Billy wouldn't notice his eyes—they were stinging, and probably red—or how hard he was

trying *not* to just...stomp off and *scream*, scrabbling at his hair. He wanted to just hide in his room again, have his little *baby* tantrum somewhere his boyfriend couldn't see, but Billy's hands held him fast. Steve took a deep breath, and it caught in his lungs, so he took another. "Love you," he whispered, and Billy's mouth quirked disbelievingly. "Love you," Steve emphasized. "I'm not gonna *let you die*, so—so don't tell me you—don't say you're gonna be okay, don't *lie* to me if—if you need me to—do that. For you. Keep you safe."

Billy watched his face for a long while—whole minutes, it felt like, and then shook his head. "I'll come in. Harrington. I—I promise, I'll come in. And if...if I...can't take care of...me," he said roughly, "—I promise I-I'll tell you. I won't lie to you, I'll say—"

Steve's tear ducts *overreacted* and spilled entirely over, while his lungs made a weird noise more appropriate for *braking trucks*, so he tried to jerk away and get to—somewhere else, where nobody had to *calm him down* when he wasn't even the one having a *problem*, but Billy yanked him into his shivering shoulder again, muttering into his hair.

"Jesus *shit*," he whispered. "Christ, Harrington, I'm—sorry, sorry, *fuck*. Sorry. Shit. I don't—I won't—I won't let anything happen to me, *jesus*. I promise, your majesty. I'm your knight, right? I gotta—I gotta be strong, right. Keep myself safe. Can't make you worry about your knight. Don't be *broken*, holy shit—"

"—'m not *broken*, just—just don't *die in my yard*," Steve sniffled, laughing, and then made another noise like a squashed cat as Billy's arms tightened. "I just—I *fucking love* you," Steve whispered.

"Yeah," Billy told him. "Yeah. Jesus. Sorry. I can—I know you'd come for me, right, I don't—I don't need to freak you out."

"A-asshole," Steve whispered shakily, groaning. "—f-fucking ...*prick*."

"Yeah," Billy agreed, laughing a little unsteadily himself, and burying his face in Steve's hair. "Yeah. Sorry. I'm so sorry, shit, I'll help, okay. You can—you can relax some, I'll help you. Jesus, sorry—sorry—"

“Fucking dipshit,” Steve slid his arms around Billy, squirming further into the blanket. “God, fucking...love you, you *asshole*.”

“Mmn,” Billy nodded, sighing shakily, and kissing his ear.

“...sweetie-pie,” Steve tried, and Billy started laughing, his breath hot against Steve’s head.

The next day, El drug Max over while Billy and Steve stood around smoking. They were hauling four full trash bags and a trifold cardboard presentation board that brought bitter memories up in Steve of middle-school science class.

“The hell is all *that*,” Billy bit out, glaring at the bags, but he yanked his keys out of his jeans and opened Steve’s trunk.

“Max’s mom won’t leave,” El reported, and Max’s eyes went red and shiny. Billy hesitated, then grabbed more bags and put them in the trunk, but Steve noticed he was gentle.

“Is this stuff...in case?” Steve guessed, and Max shook her head, sniffing. She swallowed hard, kicking a rock into the side of somebody’s car, and her tears didn’t spill over.

Billy’s shoulders were nearly up around his *ears*, and Steve squeezed his shoulder, stepping between he and Max like Steve was some kind of wall. He cleared his throat, feeling dumb.

“She won’t listen,” Max said in a weird, raspy voice. “She says *not to worry*.”

“I can blow up his brain,” El said, in the vaguely monotone voice she had when she was the last line of defense, and Billy twitched in Steve’s peripheral vision.

“Don’t do anything,” Max hissed. “She *knows* about you. She’d be so —she’d *hate* me. I gotta—I’ll try again. *Shit*. I shouldn’t have to *deal* with this.”

El shook her head solemnly, sighing.

"You can bring her to our place," Steve said, again, feeling useless. "If, uh."

"How come we have to figure this shit out," Max growled, kicking another rock. "*She's the mom.*"

"...she sure knows how to pick 'em," Steve snorted, and Billy turned to glare at him, but Max laughed.

"Yeah," she sighed. "My dad, uh, he was...he wasn't...great either." She rubbed her face roughly, groaning, and El dropped an arm around her.

Billy opened his mouth, glaring, then closed it, and Steve took advantage of the girls' bowed heads to blow him a kiss. Billy smirked, digging his fingers into his forearms, and stalked off, lighting up a few cars away.

"Waffles," declared El, after tucking Max's hair behind her ear, seeing *tears*, and freezing in place for several seconds, her hands twitching with indecision.

"What," Max whispered, wiping her nose.

"M-Mrs. Byers," El said. "And, um, Will, remember, they um, they invited us. Waffles. She said she could *make waffles.*"

"So what?" Max snorted, rubbing her eyes with her sleeves.

"So," El said, then bit her lips together.

"...you want waffles right away?" Steve asked, half tempted to chase Billy, and tell him it was *fine* he didn't want his dad *murdered*, but feeling obligated to stick it out with two girls, one of which was *crying*, and the other one looking like she wanted to. "Uh, we could take you girls uh, somewhere, before Will's—"

"I'm fine," Max laughed hoarsely. "Waffles aren't gonna solve my problems, El."

El bit her lips together, her eyes glistening with tears, and Steve wondered about the El-scale—what was a one-waffle problem, or a

whole-box-of-Eggos problem, and what it told her about *Max*, hearing that this was a problem too big for waffles.

Once El just gave up and *hugged* Max, an awkward moment, as Max's eyes begged him for help, Steve wandered over to where Billy was smoking, and bumped elbows. "...El won't kill your dad," he whispered, and Billy raised his eyebrows, eyeing him doubtfully.

"You sure about that?" he asked. "Kinda sounded like she might no matter *what* Max said."

"Um," Steve said, grimacing, and remembering the stories of El just...breaking necks. *No great loss*, he thought to himself, then cleared his throat guiltily. "We can talk to her. Tell her you, uh, you don't want her to—"

"*That's* why?" Billy snarled, turning to toss his cigarette away. "That's why she shouldn't? It's *murder*, Harrington—"

"He hit you," Steve pointed out, mumbling, and Billy reached out, glanced around, and then pulled his hand back and put it in his pocket.

"...so did you," Billy hissed back, but he was grinning, a little.

"I didn't *want to*," Steve growled. "And I *won't*, ever again, I'd *never* —"

"Yeah, sure," Billy grinned, but it looked soft, and so did his lips. Steve cleared his throat, so many protests swarming his mouth that he couldn't get any of them out. "You'd never hit me until I'm standing in front of the mugs and you want the marshmallows—"

"I might *elbow* you—" Steve protested, and Billy leaned in, smirking.

"Until I tease you about your *feeblings*," he whispered, and Steve raised his arm to punch Billy's shoulder, and glared at it in despair. Billy threw an arm around his shoulders, and yanked him close. "...it's not the same, Harrington," he whispered. "I know you want me around."

"He does too, he loves you, he has to," Steve argued, and Billy laughed, rubbing his face. "He does," Steve insisted. "He *knows* you, he's known you forever! He loves you. He—he *has* to—"

"Not sure your math works out," Billy told him, and he looked *fond*, which had Steve lurching closer, licking his own lips, until he remembered they were in the school parking lot.

"Not gonna kiss you right now," Steve informed him, stiffly, "—but I'm right. If he doesn't love you, he—" Steve tried to think of an option, remembering chubby-cheeked Billy from the Christmas photos, in his awful knitted overalls. Steve frowned hard into the middle distance. "...maybe he's an alien," he said slowly, and Billy dissolved into snickers, his face pink-cheeked around his fingers.

"I don't get how your brain works," he whispered.

"It works better than your *dad's*," Steve shot back, sliding his hand down and around Billy's forearm, where he'd drawn the hearts, and rubbing his thumb over Billy's sleeve. "We won't let El kill your dad, okay, she likes you, she likes *Will*, she won't do anything to—to you, she won't—hurt your family." He groaned. "How come he's such an *asshole?! Jesus*," Steve asked the air around them, waving his arms, and Billy laughed. "Come on," Steve told him. "—we're going to Will's for waffles, remember?"

Billy shook his head like he was trying to clear it, but he didn't argue, and when they piled into the car, he called shotgun and dropped next to Steve. He grabbed Steve's hand, *trembling* for some reason, but when Steve tried to ask, Billy took a deep breath and started an argument with Max and El about whether they needed to bring anything to dinner. Billy and Steve both felt greasing the wheels with unfamiliar adults was wise, while Max and Eleven sounded perplexed.

El was eventually the only holdout on gifts for Mrs. Byers—from her obvious alarm, Steve suspected she was worried she'd been breaking some unknown taboo—so Steve swung into Bradley's Big Buy and watched as Billy grabbed flowers, then stared at the sparkling cider. He spun slowly in place, and Max, picking up his nerves, grabbed and put back four different kinds of fruit. El advocated filling an entire

cart with whipped cream, and Steve let her fill a basket.

“Grab that sparkly juice,” Steve advised, always inclined to charm parents. “Y’know, that,” he said, waving at the Martinelli’s, and Billy and Max hoisted two bottles under each arm and followed each other to the checkout in silence. El frowned at them, then slowly did the same, and Steve tried not to laugh, watching the three of them in a solemn row, bottles under their arms, like they were carrying munitions and rations to the front lines. He considered telling Billy they could go back that night and use the spare cider to fill his pool, then considered the way Billy’s fingers were tight and pale against the bottles, and leaned to whisper, “Surprised you know what to do with an invite, Trespasser.”

“Thought I was your knight,” Billy whispered back, and Steve stared at his smirk. He was leaning in for a kiss when Max’s foot tromped on the arch of his foot.

At the Byers’, Billy drummed his thumbs on the steering wheel, and grabbed Steve’s arm when he started to climb out of the car. “So this is it. This is—this is what you’re doing for Will. Now. Momma Byers and ‘Hopper’—” he still enunciated ‘Hopper’ like it was in quotes, “—they’re watching, today is—now.”

“What?” Steve cocked his head, listening, but also watching Max and El haul bags of cider towards House Byers, and trying to evaluate how many of the Party were pressed against the windows. It looked like an entire school bus in there. He sighed, shutting his car door.

“At IHOP,” Billy hissed. “You said you’d—you’d be —*queer* at people. So Will’d know what to do. See what his mom said. That’s why he *wants us here*.”

“Oh,” Steve said, swallowing as the terrifying thought of telling Joyce Byers he was queer reared its ugly head. *Maybe I can get her alone before we eat*, he told himself, grimacing. *She’s—she’s nice, maybe—maybe she won’t be—too angry*. He took a deep breath. *Better me than Will, anyway*. “I—yeah, maybe, I—”

He was still squinting at the front windows of the Byers' house, wondering how the kids hadn't figured out they were visible, no matter how much they made shushing motions at each other, when Billy came around the car, wiping his palms on his jeans. He yanked Steve out, and grabbed him like they were about to square dance. Steve stared at his face, the landscape whirling behind Billy as he *dipped* Steve into an open-mouthed kiss.

Steve swore into it, throwing his arms around Billy's shoulders, then relaxed when he didn't get dropped on his ass, and tried not to think about the muscles holding him a foot off the ground. "Giving me so many feeblings," he mumbled, and Billy *did* nearly drop him, laughing, but swung him back upright to a *chorus* of whoops and whistles from the house.

Billy froze, spinning to stare at the kids crowding onto the porch—it looked like Lucas had even brought his little sister, Steve thought, distracted by his heart thudding in his chest, half with adrenaline, and half with all his blood rushing to his dick. He took a deep breath, watching Billy brace his feet like he expected to get punched. "Shit, Harrington—I—I—*fuck*, I thought—"

"It's fine," Steve told him, "—come on, it's okay—", grabbed his hand, and tugged him towards the house.

Billy made a soft noise in the back of his throat, and didn't move.

"Okay, stay there for a sec," Steve said, diving back into the car for the last bag of cider, and the flowers Billy had grabbed.

Footsteps crunched, and Will's voice piped up behind him. "I'm so sorry!" he panted. "I'm so sorry, Eleven told me, and Max, and Mike, and he told Nancy, and I told *Jonathan*, and Max told *Lucas*, and nobody'd told *Dustin*, and I thought that was *mean*—"

"It was," Dustin's voice confirmed, as Steve crawled half under his seats looking for an escaped can of whipped cream. "It was an *asshole move*, Steve Harrington—"

Steve resurfaced with the groceries, and Billy cleared his throat, saying, hoarsely, "How many goddamn people did I just—"

“Like a hundred,” Dustin said, and Will punched him in the shoulder. Dustin snickered, smacking back at him. “—I mean, *all* the Wheelers are in there, Hopper brought his deputies, there’s the science guys from the lab, Mrs. Byers’ coworkers from Radio Shack—The Mayor—the President—”

Billy narrowed his eyes at Dustin’s grin, and reached over slowly to brace one hand on his shoulder and shove him sideways. Dustin staggered, but his grin didn’t falter.

“What the *hell*,” Billy hissed at Will, who turned to look at the house.

“Not everybody saw?” he said hopefully.

Dustin staggered, cackling. “Oh, and we videotaped it, too. I’m gonna play it on the school intercom. With commentary. Like a football game—”

Billy stooped to scoop up some snow, and tossed it at Dustin’s face. About half of it went in Dustin’s open mouth, and Steve raised his eyebrows at the gauntlet of carrying bags of groceries through the sudden battlefield, where Will was packing together a snowball, glaring at Dustin, and Billy was shivering, but cackling into the cuffs of his borrowed sweatshirt. Dustin smacked Will in the face with a snowball before Will got his properly shaped, and Will yowled in fury, chasing him around the yard.

El trotted back out, eyes narrowed, and then crouched to form her own snowball, and Mike ran after her, waving a hat and scarf. Luckily, Joyce Byers and Jonathan met Steve at the door, and relieved him of his bags of whipped cream, flowers, and sparkling cider. Behind them, Nancy waved her arms at the bags, looking weirded out, and Steve shrugged back at her, rolling his eyes skyward. She shook her head, laughing.

As Steve turned back to the melee, Lucas wandered out the door past him, adjusting his scarf under his coat and yanking a fluffy hat down over his ears.

Billy’s head jerked up. He’d been helping Will layer more snow along the top of an existing snow fort, and Steve was distracted for a

second thinking about all the hiding places and fortifications Will Byers built, and who he pulled in there every time. Probably his mom, Steve thought. Joyce Byers seemed like she threw a mean snowball. He liked the image of the two of them pelting Jonathan, while Nancy mounted an attack on their flanks.

Billy's eyes narrowed as he took a deep breath, muttered something to Will, and stuck his hands in the pockets of Steve's sweatshirt again. He made for Lucas.

Lucas looked up, swallowed, and backed away, and Steve nearly stumbled catching up to them. He ran up to hear Billy stage-whispering "Need to talk to you. The sheriff's watching from the kitchen, you're fine, can—can I just—around the corner of the house?"

He'd chosen his moment well—Will had run out and tripped Dustin, shoveling snow into his face with both arms, while Mike tried to pull him off, and El tried to pull *Mike* out of the fray, and Max hit everyone with snowballs indiscriminately. Nobody was watching Lucas and Billy, except Steve.

Lucas glanced over Billy's shoulder at Steve, who froze, then flexed his biceps, and gave a salute. Lucas covered a snort with his mitten, and turned his deep frown back on Billy, who was waiting, hunched and scowling at the ground. "Fine," Lucas said, and crunched around to the side of the house.

Steve tried to crunch through the snow exactly when they did, the sound of their footsteps—and Dustin cackling as he and El dropped an enormous snowball on Mike's head—covering the loud crunches of Steve tiptoeing onto the Byers' porch. He sank onto the porch swing, listening.

"Listen, I fucked up, I'm sorry—" Billy started, and Lucas snorted. Steve winced, and started to stand, but Billy wasn't knocked out of stride. "—I shouldn't—I was—sorry."

"What, you want me to *forgive* you?" Lucas asked, sounding pissed. "You're such an—"

"No! No, I don't care, but uh—I mean. It's—ha. It's not gonna happen, right? But you're—you're gonna be—around. You're one of Steve's—"

"I've got *parents*, actually," Lucas informed him.

"You're Max's friend, and I'll—I'm gonna be—around," Billy pushed on, and Steve half wanted to lean around the corner of the house and cheer for him. "I just wanted to say you're, uh, safe. I know you don't—"

"Bull *shit*," Lucas hissed at him.

"No, you—you *are*, dammit—sorry," Billy interrupted. "Steve would beat me to death with a nailbat if I took another swing at you. Hopper would help him hide the body. Look, you don't have to *trust* me, just believe I don't want to *die*."

Lucas barked a laugh.

"I can—I'll stay away from Erica if you want," Billy told him, "—and, uh, cat girl, Tomoko? Tomiko?"

"It's *Tomika*," Lucas muttered.

"I'll tell them I can't help. If you want, I'll even tell them *why*, and they won't *want* my help, but. You don't have to be...watching for me." There was what felt like a long pause, as Steve tried to crane his neck around the edge of the deck without the swing creaking. Snow crunched as one of them adjusted his footing.

"...okay," Lucas said, finally. "I guess."

"You want me to stay the hell away from them? I wanted to know before I went in there," Billy asked, keeping his voice low.

Lucas didn't answer again for long minutes, with only the sounds of the snowball fight, and their feet crunching in the snow. "You know what, you can run all the errands for those morons you want," he said finally. "But if you—if you do *anything*—"

"No, I know," Billy laughed. His voice cracked. "I'm sorry I was such

a shitheel. I'm trying to be...less shitty."

That dropped into silence, and Steve clenched his hands on the edge of the swing, shivering, and resisting leaning around to see what was going on.

"Won't be hard," Lucas muttered. "Max is scared of you. She's—she's not scared of much. And you *scare* her—"

"I know. Working on a truce with her too," Billy told him.

"That what this is? A *truce*?"

"I agree to be less shitty, and you agree to wait and see whether I am? I think that's a truce," Billy said, and Lucas laughed, coughing.

"Might have to help that cat a few more times before I believe you," he said, but he sounded less hostile.

"I already told Steve I'd help with his child adoption franchise," Billy said, and Steve's mouth fell open in offense. His eyes narrowed, but Billy was talking again. "If you want anything, lemme know. I can start trying to make it up to you. And Max. Or—or just tell me to fuck off."

There was another long pause, and Steve wrung his hands like a soap opera star, but his face heated with pride for Billy, who didn't start yelling or anything, just waited.

"...truce, then," Lucas said, finally. "I guess."

"Truce," Billy repeated, and Steve wondered whether they were shaking hands. He stood carefully so the swing wouldn't bang against the porch rail, and trotted out into the snow, crossing his arms, as Billy and Lucas came back around the house.

Their appearance caught Max's eye, and her head jerked up, wide-eyed as she looked Lucas up and down. She dropped the snowball she was making, clenching her hands into fists, but Lucas sighed and gave her a thumbs-up, and Billy glanced at him, and then slowly echoed it.

She stared, then cocked her head, mouth quirking, and took a shaky breath. When she walked up to Lucas, and Billy walked by them towards Steve, Steve heard her hiss “About *time*,” at Billy, who glared over at her. “*Thank* you,” she mouthed, looking indignant, but Billy stared back before nodding.

“Good job,” Steve whispered, wondering whether he could just *kiss* Billy, now, since he’d done it already, in full view of basically everyone they knew. Billy snorted, ducking his head. “Y’know,” Steve whispered, dodging another ‘snowball’ from Dustin, who was having a frustrating time getting them to stick together in his mittens, and kept throwing showers of snow that only went about six feet. “Y’know you don’t—have to do anything—” Steve bent to scoop up a handful of snow and smack Dustin upside the head with a throw straight out of his days in Little League.

“—I don’t need to apologize to that kid?” Billy raised his eyebrows.

“Uh, I mean, yeah, you needed to do that,” Steve grimaced. “Uh, that—that was good. I thought—I thought you, uh, he might piss you off, so I was kinda...listening.”

Billy shrugged. “Kinda dumb of him to let me get him alone, really. He knew you were there?”

“Yeah, he saw me,” Steve shrugged, making a face at his current snowball, before surveying the battlefield, and smacking it between Max’s shoulderblades. “Uh, no, I mean. I don’t know who all...saw the, um, the—” he stopped, feeling his face heat as he remembered the feeling of Billy’s cold hands against his neck and lower back, the stomach clench of so many *eyes*, and the heady spin and drop in Billy’s arms, half kiss, half roller coaster.

“I’m such a moron,” Billy muttered. “Why the hell aren’t they out here yelling at us? I thought Will’d get them to the damn *window*. Did it even *work*?”

“We can just *talk* to Mrs. Byers,” Steve ended on a yelp, imagining Hopper grabbing them by their hoods and shaking them, and telling them to get the hell out. He was pretty sure Eleven had told the man *something*, but Billy’s tension had brought up thoughts of his calls to

the Party's houses going unanswered, and no more little nosy shits hanging around his car asking for rides. Will's mom telling him not to talk to the Byers' family. Nancy having to choose between her new boyfriend, and her new friend. "Shit," he mumbled. "What if she's pissed?"

Billy took a step towards him, then stopped. "That didn't—you didn't think of that?!" he hissed. "Jesus christ on a cracker, Harrington."

Steve blinked at him, imagining the blue-sashed blond dude of Sunday school crosslegged on a Saltine. "What?"

"...it's a good thing you've got a loyal advisor," Billy whispered, shaking his head.

After a few minutes, Mrs. Byers wandered out, shivering, and yelled "Who wants waffles?!" and El shoved the whole armload of snow she'd been compacting into Max's arms. Max twisted her whole body to sling it around at Billy, who put his hands up into claws and roared at her, *covered* in snow, resulting in the hitherto-never-before-seen sight of Max Hargrove collapsing in giggles. Lucas and Dustin stared at her as her knees bent, and she slowly collapsed forward to cackle into her arms, crouched in the snow up to her elbows.

Mrs. Byers was still holding the flowers, frowning at them like she wasn't sure how they'd ended up in her arms, but she waved at the table, set with Bert and Ernie paper plates and a can of whipped cream by each.

"There...certainly will be enough whipped cream for everyone," she said gamely, and Steve wondered which he'd pick, if a genie asked him—Mrs. Byers for his own mother, or Billy's. "Get in here," she rolled her eyes, grinning. "You're all crazy, it's freezing out here!"

"I know, Mom!" Will yelled, but lowered his voice to whisper to Billy and Steve as they sat down. "Do you think she saw you? *Kissing?*"

"Well, I'm not doing it *again*," Billy whispered back, and Steve caught

Hopper's frown— *he saw us*, he thought, swallowing hard, and then Nancy grinned at him across the table.

She was sitting with Jonathan at the card table, pushed close to extend the seating, and raised a glass of cider to Steve. He nodded, his stomach clenching, and exchanged another smile with Mrs. Byers.

She can't have seen, he told himself, as Will hovered around their chairs, telling Billy about losing all but his green marker for two days and drawing everybody in his class as an alien.

"Right," Billy narrowed his eyes at him. "I haveta talk to you later, Ringbearer."

Will beamed at him, grabbing his arm. "The waffles aren't done yet. I can show you my *room*."

The whole gathering watched little Will Byers drag Billy Hargrove off, chattering away.

"Predators first cull the weak and the small," said Dustin, and Nancy threw her paper plate at him, and missed.

Jonathan tripped over the edge of the rug jumping out of his seat to run after them while Nancy's plate was still rolling around the table on one edge. Everybody else was still quiet, watching Billy and Will disappear, and Jonathan's protective charge, so Steve groaned, extricated himself from all the chairs shoved together—smacking the back of Dustin's head, for good measure—and ran after them.

Jonathan had his hand on Will's doorknob when Steve grabbed it.

"It's okay," he whispered. "They get along."

Jonathan stared at him, shaking his head, and Steve squeezed the other boy's wrist tighter, shaking his head, as they listened to Will saying "And *this* one I drew you as Boromir."

"...great," Billy laughed, a little tense, then, warming Steve's heart, he summoned up some enthusiasm and added, "—no, I mean, it's great, *really*, what's that, can I even *see* in that helmet?", and touched off a

lecture on 14th century armor from Will that nearly put Steve to sleep right there in the hallway. Billy was actually asking *questions*, so it kept *going*, and Jonathan listened with his jaw set, then finally glared at Steve and folded his arms, waiting.

“Okay, okay, short William,” Billy finally said, when Will paused for breath. “We have to get our stories straight.”

Jonathan grabbed for the door again, eyes wide, and Steve grabbed his arms, wondering how many conversations he was going to end up eavesdropping on in one day.

“We do?” Will asked. “Why? Help me put these markers away before I lose them again—about what?”

“Yeah, okay,” something creaked, “—I, uh, I told Steve you threatened me, when—uh, I mean, like Dustin said he’d put sugar in the gas tank of my Camaro if I fucked it up with Steve, and your mom had some *stuff to say*—”

Will was giggling. “What did my *mom* say?!”

“Too scary to repeat,” Billy shuddered audibly, and Will giggled harder. “And she thought we were just *friends*, she’s gonna tie my balls to an anchor—”

Jonathan had stopped trying to open the door, in favor of just staring at Steve’s face in the dim light of the hallway. Steve was trying to cover his laughter, his eyes stinging.

“Anyway, I got—Steve was—anyway. I was telling him about it, and I said you did the same thing, so we have to—if he asks you, we should say the same thing—”

“Ohhhh,” Will said. “I have to tie, um, I don’t think I want to, uh, tie your—”

“No!” Billy yelped, laughing. “No, something else!”

“What should I threaten you with?” Will asked thoughtfully. “I can’t just tell my mom, it should be different—”

Steve let go of Jonathan's wrists to lean back against the wall, his shoulders shaking with snickers.

"You don't *actually* have to threaten me—" Billy said softly, and it sounded like bedsprings squeaked.

"No, I should!" came Will's voice. "I should!"

"I guess if you *want* to," Billy groaned. "I mean, who doesn't."

"I *should* threaten you," Will announced again. "And Steve, right? I'll threaten Steve too. Because *you're* my friend. I have to threaten Steve for you!"

"Okay, lil' buddy," Billy laughed, sounding fond.

Jonathan was cocking his head like a confused dog, squinting at Steve in the dim light of the hallway, and Steve just shook his head, trying to muffle his snickering.

"Oh!" Will muttered, and the floor stopped creaking as he held still. "I should threaten Nancy, and uh, and Max, and Lucas—"

From the sound, Billy burst out laughing as hard as Steve was. "You—you got a lot to do there, Midget William."

"Maybe the same threat would work for everyone," Will said plaintively. "It'd be *simpler*."

"Any thoughts?" Billy asked, through giggles.

"I could sneak in and peroxide your hair," Will offered. He sounded doubtful. "I'd have to get my mom to buy peroxide."

Steve slid down the wall, letting his head lean back against it and clapping both hands over his mouth.

Jonathan sighed and sat down across from him. "Wait," he mouthed, his whisper nearly silent. "—you and *Billy Hargrove?!"*

Steve shrugged, still muffling giggles, and unable to care what *Jonathan Byers* thought about who he was dating. Maybe Jonathan

would get some sexy photos of *Billy* this time through the window, Steve thought, and snickered harder.

Jonathan stared at the wallpaper across the narrow hall, then shook his head.

“You bleach my hair and we’ll have a *problem*, Smalliam Byers,” Billy said, snorting. “Besides, I’d wake up. Steve would wake up.”

“Well, if you screw that up that bad, he won’t be there,” Will pointed out, giggling, “—what did you call me?!”

“Jesus, you’re brutal,” Billy muttered, his laughter sounding pained. “There you go, there’s my punishment, waking up alone—”

“I’ll get embarrassing stories from Max, and tell him,” Will decided. “I bet she knows some good ones—I’ll tell Steve all your dumb baby stories—”

Billy cackled harder, and Jonathan stood up, dusting himself off. “Waffles are gonna be ready, and El will yell,” he whispered, glaring down at Steve, who blinked teary eyes up at him.

Steve nodded, wiping his eyes. His cheeks hurt from smiling.

When he rejoined the table, Dustin dropped into Billy’s seat next to him. “Will’s mom didn’t notice,” he whispered. “The hell was that, anyway? Didn’t you *see* us all?”

Steve tried to think of a way to explain without explaining... *Will Byers’ secret queer identity*, he thought, trying not to snicker. His internal voice took the opportunity to sound like Batman. *It must stay secret, or his family, and the world, could be in danger.* “Uh,” he started. “...um, ah,” he tried again, crossing his arms, and wishing Billy would come back. “A-animal instinct. Love? He’s horny,” he mumbled.

“Those were *options*, Steve,” Dustin hissed, eyes narrowed. “You don’t know which it *is*? Anyway, *Hopper* might have seen you—”

When El shrieked “WAFFLES!” from the kitchen door, Billy wandered out, with Will trailing behind him telling all about ghost stories he could bring over for another sleepover. Billy ruffled his hair, sidling around the crowded front room to kick the chair Dustin was sitting in.

“I wanna sit next to *Billy*,” Will told Mike, who’d sat next to Dustin while Billy was in the bedroom talking to Will.

“I sure don’t,” Mike made a face, relinquishing the seat with a shudder, and stepping around the table only to stagger as El threw both arms around his neck. He laughed as she swung him around in a spin, chanting ‘waffles, waffles, waffles,’ and Hopper finally scooped her up, and plopped her in the chair closest to the kitchen, before helping Joyce bring out plates with a soft smile on his face.

Billy frowned around, then stood again—the whole table paused to watch—before snorting a laugh and walking into the kitchen. “Why don’t you go sit down?” he smiled charmingly at Joyce Byers. “I can keep my nose to the forge in here, you’re juggling enough out there.”

She squinted at him, then looked over at Will, whose face looked torn between disappointment and excitement. “Thank you!” she said, finally. “But as soon as I’m done, I’ll let you have a break!”

Billy nodded, bending to stare into the waffle-iron at eye level. *Preparing to meet his foe*, Steve thought, and then Joyce dropped into the seat between he and Will, handing them both oven-warm plates of waffles.

“You sure seem to like him,” she said to Will, grabbing at one of the gajillion bottles of whipped cream El had placed around the table.

“Um,” Will’s chair thumped as he swung his legs. He bit his lip. “Uh, he’s, um, he’s Steve’s friend.”

Steve widened his eyes at Will, hoping he’d realize he was acting like they’d started a crime ring on their sleepover weekend.

“He’s over a lot,” Steve said, digging into his waffle and smiling over with the casual smile guaranteed to make moms invite him to stay for

dinner. “They bonded over Lord of the Rings.”

“And *music*,” Will breathed, bouncing in his chair. “He has rock music *about the Lord of the Rings*, Mom!”

“And they’re both named William,” Steve rolled his eyes as Will nodded wildly.

“We’re both named William, Mom!”

Will was talking into almost complete silence, as Hopper, Dustin, Mike, Lucas, Erica, Max, Eleven, Nancy, and Jonathan all considered Billy, who was burning a waffle. He grabbed the smoky thing and threw it in the sink, tensed, and looked over at their silently watching faces. “Sorry, ma’am,” he laughed. “Not used to this waffle maker.”

“We made a whole fort in the front room and slept there,” Will continued stubbornly, cutting his waffle so the knife scraped loudly on his plate. “Didn’t think it was dumb. I didn’t have to say I can’t—sleep, sometimes.”

Oh, Steve thought, blinking. *That’s why he wanted us down there.*

Billy’d started doing the dishes, which was probably loud enough to drown them out, and also why he’d gotten distracted enough to start subtly shuffle-dancing to the music in his head. Hopper’s frown at him intensified, then turned on Steve.

Steve tried to dodge his gaze, and looked the other way to find Nancy and Jonathan Byers’ eyes trying to burn a hole in his head. He grabbed the whipped cream and began slowly coating his entire waffle in perfect rows.

“...I’m glad you had a good time,” Joyce said, finally, exchanging glances with Will’s little goblin horde of friends.

“He helped Tomika and me get her cat out of a tree,” said Erica, and Mike choked. Dustin slapped his back.

“*Tomika’s cat?!*” Mike spluttered. “That’s not a cat, it’s—it’s a *beast*. Slashing damage. Roll a save against Fear.”

“Only for *cowards*,” Erica huffed.

“I don’t know what she thinks could hurt that cat. It’s gonna die one day trying to fight a Mack truck,” Lucas sighed, and Erica punched him in the shoulder.

“*Billy* said he’d help us if we needed it, *Lucas*,” she hissed.

“Should have just left it in the tree,” Max filled her hand with whipped cream and licked it, and El stared, then stared at the whipped cream bottle. Max caught El’s stare, and waved the bottle of whipped cream, watching Eleven’s head follow it. Max grinned, and leaned close to fill El’s hands with whipped cream. “I told Billy to *run*, if he saw them coming again. He looked like he’d been *mauled*,” Max muttered, carefully putting a swirl around the top of El’s double handful of whipped cream.

“Good,” Mike snorted, glancing at Lucas, who grimaced faintly.

“Where the hell was I?!” Dustin glared at Steve. “Your—uh, *Billy* meets a *wolverine vigilante*, and nobody calls me?!”

“No idea,” Steve sighed, remembering Lucas’ panic over his little sister alone with the boy who’d started punching him for no reason. It was easier to focus on Billy *now*.

Steve reminded himself about *Tommy*, and much easier it’d been, just pretending everything was okay, and going along with whatever dumb shit idea Tommy suggested. It helped him resist wandering into the kitchen and just pushing Billy against the cupboards for a warm kiss that tasted like strawberries and apple cider.

He beat me unconscious because I got in his way, Steve told himself, chewing the suddenly tasteless waffle. *There’s good inside him, Luke Skywalker, but there’s other stuff too*. He sighed, wishing he could—time travel, or something, back to before Billy stomped in and beat the shit out of him and terrified the kids—and maybe, he thought idly, before he spray-painted shit about Nancy all over town.

“I fixed him up,” El told them, breaking Steve’s train of thought. She beamed at Max, between surveying her hands full of whipped cream

with the wide eyes of one given a priceless treasure. “Nancy’s first aid book said you could use bread to bandage wounds, and I wanted to try it, but nobody had a sandwich.”

“Stick to gauze first,” Hopper laughed, pinching between his eyebrows. “He rescued a *cat* out of a *tree*?”

“Should have taken some photos,” Jonathan muttered to Nancy. “Evidence.”

“I can testify for the court,” Max shot over, her eyebrows raised.

Steve was half torn between resigned annoyance that evidence of Billy’s few good actions was questioned, and *longing* for pictures of Billy wrangling tiny, hissing Marcenia Lyle Alberga out of the tree and stuffing her in his sweatshirt pocket for the climb down. “Definitely happened,” he shrugged. “That’s why he’s got band-aids on his fingers.”

“I did those too,” El told Hopper, for some reason. “I know what to do.” He waved her off, shaking his head and grinning.

At around this point, Billy brought everyone a refill on the waffles, and the kids opened *every single bottle* of sparkling cider, and Dustin smacked his lips, half-closing his eyes and saying, “1981. It was a good year.”

“To Hawkin’s resident Jedi,” Mike said, toasting Eleven, who narrowed her eyes and clinked her glass against his as Max toasted Lucas as Fastest Skateboard Rookie and he burst out laughing, grimacing and rubbing his elbows. Max elbowed him companiably, and blushed.

“Very fruity on the palate,” Dustin declared, smirking. Will giggled, and Mrs. Byers made a show of swirling her plastic cup.

“Hold it on the roof of your mouth for a moment,” she said, in a bad French accent, “—then you will *feel* the flavor,” and Will cackled harder, covering his mouth so he didn’t spit cider.

When Billy sauntered out with more waffles, Will dubbed him “Most Honorable Cat Wrangler”, amidst cheers, and Mrs. Byers stood back up to give him his seat next to Steve. She walked back in the kitchen to exclaim “Oh, you didn’t have to wash *everything*.”

“I housetrained him!” yelled Max, and Dustin dubbed her the Great High Housetrainer. Will flopped half into Billy’s lap, proclaiming him the Favored Lasagna Maker to the King in a flood of giggles.

Nancy, then Jonathan, got up to offer help to Joyce clear the table, and Hopper began collecting plates, a spare fork behind his ear to stab every free-range strawberry segment scattered across the tablecloth and stick it in his mouth.

Steve, now officially the King Of Ceramic Monsters and Lord Nailbat, got up to pee after five cups of cider.

He’d finished fixing his hair, and was just unzipping his pants, when he heard a thump and creak what sounded like *inches* away, and realized it was through the wall. He frowned at it, extracting his dick from his briefs, to hear a horrible wet sound, like a garbage disposal full of slugs, and then, *clearly*, and inches away, Nancy’s voice saying “Um, mmm—uh, maybe less tongue?”

Steve clapped his hand over his mouth, hearing himself squeak. He stared at the wall.

“You said you *wanted* it sloppy,” Jonathan replied, and Steve stared from the toilet, to the wall, taking a step away. The floor creaked, and the squeaking of Jonathan’s ancient rusty bedsprings stopped.

“Something creaked,” Jonathan whispered. “Wait, wait, wha—what if that was Will—”

“They’re all busy cleaning up,” Nancy whispered back, and Steve held very still, wondering whether he could tiptoe outside, and pee on a tree, or whether he’d look up to see another lineup of children—probably holding up point cards, like Olympic judges were assessing his dick. *Yes, wait*, he thought desperately. *Just let me take a piss and leave.*

The *noise* started again, sucking and slurping. Steve yanked his zipper back up, pressing his hand so hard over his mouth to muffle his laughter that he started seeing stars from lack of oxygen, and started to fear he'd pee down his own leg. He inched to the door, and poked his head out to see a bunch of neon knit triangles—El's sweater, he realized, right outside the door.

"Aren't you *glad* to be getting along better with him?" she asked.

"I don't *know*," Max's choked-up voice replied, and Steve pulled the door nearly closed again as she continued. "I don't—he's such a *prick*, El! He's—he's so *goddamn*ed mean, he's always—now he's just what, just *nice* now, and I'm supposed to *trust* him?"

Steve leaned against the sink, scrabbling at his newly-fixed hair. Behind him, through the bathroom wall, the awful saliva-demon noise changed, and Nancy *yelped*. "Why is that *cold*—" she hissed, and he wheezed into the back of his hand, shaking with suppressed giggles. He wondered why Max and El couldn't hear the horror going on through the wall—maybe Jonathan had blankets nailed to his door, or maybe they were just too caught up in talking about Billy.

"You don't...you don't have to be *friends* with him," El offered, sounding uncertain, and Max laughed, sounding a little unhinged.

"I know! I know! He's—he's a *waste of space*, but he—we were—"

Steve felt bad, leaning closer, but it helped drown out what sounded like a dog licking itself on the other side of the wall. He plugged the ear facing what must be Jonathan's bedroom.

"Was he...nice sometimes?" El asked, and Max stomped, growling.

"I *guess*?" she hissed back. "Yeah? Sometimes he'd—give me skating advice, or—or *he'd* be mad, and Billy'd push me to the side like a shithead and—and draw the—draw—he'd get *hurt*." El was quiet, and Max's voice got shakier. "I didn't—I don't know what to do when Billy gets hurt."

"I'll save you," El said, her voice low, and Steve couldn't help smiling as he pictured her seeing the Batsignal, and grabbing her mask.

"I don't need *saving*," Max said hoarsely, with a snort. "My *mom* needs saving. *Billy* needs—he could—I think he's—"

"What?" El asked, sounding as confused as Steve was.

"I think he's—pretending to be nice, for Steve," Max whispered. "He always—he's good for a while, you know, he's good in...stores, he's nice if people are *watching*. But then as soon as we're alone—"

Even the sound of a *loud* bedspring creak, two squawks, a thud, and an explosion of giggles through the wall didn't distract Steve from considering Max's point.

"But he's been nice to *Will*," Max went on, the floor creaked as she stomped in a circle, but Nancy and Jonathan were laughing too hard to hear. "I just—how come he can keep it together for *Will*, y'know? He never built *me* any goddamn pillow forts, this is to show off for *Steve*."

"Maybe...maybe he wasn't trying before," El offered, and Max made kind of an awful noise, deep in her throat.

"Yeah," she whispered. "I—I don't think he was. He—y'know, he took me once, out to a skate park. He knew the skaters, it wasn't just—he ignored me the whole time—but mom was upset because of something, and *he'd* been nasty to us all day, and Billy—he grabbed me, and he hauled me off to the skate park. It was—I thought he—"

"I will take you to the skate park," El told her, and Max laughed, sniffing. "When you are sad. Billy can come if he's nice to you. If you want him there. I will take you to the skate park."

Max's sniffing sounded wetter. "I-I'll teach you to do flips. I—we could—get you a board—Billy's old one—"

"I could ask for one," El said. "Do you want another waffle?"

"I never want to eat waffles again," Max laughed, making gulping noises. "I'm so sick of waffles, El."

"...I—we could—I—" El stumbled under this new load of information, and Max giggled harder.

"I'm not hungry, El. Let's—let's go back. Let me blow my nose."

At this, she pushed the door to the bathroom open, clonking it into Steve's knee, and he scrambled back, holding his finger over his mouth and pointing to the wall, through which came clearly the sound of Nancy and Jonathan reading a love poem, in unison.

"I'm *so sorry*," Steve whispered, as Max laughed so hard she had to lean against the bathroom counter.

"Oh my *god*," she whispered back. "How long have you been *stuck* in here?!"

"Blow your nose," he held out a handful of toilet paper. "It'll sound just like their kissing."

"Were you listening to them?" El asked under her breath, frowning as Nancy and Jonathan started kissing again.

"I didn't *want* to," he hissed back. "I was trying to *pee*—"

"Hurry *up*," Nancy's voice came through the wall, and Jonathan said "It's a *really small room*, okay—", and Max and Steve's eyes met in horror.

"*Heeeellllp*," Max wheezed, snickering. She grabbed El's arm in one hand, and Steve's in the other, and drug them out of the bathroom and down the hall, back into the kitchen/dining part of the trailer. "Oh my *god*, what was that—"

"Harrington," Billy said, seated at the dinner table with his face a little too blank, as his little sister drug Steve into the front room. "Where've you *been*," he hissed, as Steve dropped into the seat next to him, registering the general silence. The sounds of giggling and screaming came from out front, in the snow, and Billy had been alone in the Byers' front room with Hopper and Joyce.

"So you're staying *at Steve's house*," Joyce was saying. She and Hopper had matching frowns, and folded arms.

Max looked from the two of them to her brother, and rubbed her face. She groaned. "Who wants to snowball fight," she asked joylessly. "Billy, last one outside is...a soggy waffle."

"Thank you," he hissed, laughing unevenly, the cider cup in his hand twitching towards her in a weak toast. He stood, glancing at the door, but froze at Mrs. Byers' voice.

"Wait," she said, and Billy dropped back into the chair with a shaky sigh. "Steve's parents are okay with that?" she continued, underailable.

"They're fine," Steve told her, resisting the urge to squirm like a toddler who has to potty. "Can we—"

"But you're the—" she frowned at Hopper, then Billy again. "You are the one who showed up and started the fight? Broke my dishes?"

Billy nodded, glancing at Hopper. His shoulderblades hit the back of his chair, and he twitched. "Yes ma'am."

"Why?!" Mrs. Byers flailed her arms, and Billy stared past her.

"It was unacceptable," he said. Steve slid his hand over and squeezed Billy's knee, and he jerked, shooting a startled frown back at Steve. "There was no good reason, ma'am. I apologize, and it will never happen again."

Hopper crossed his arms, backing all the way away to the far wall and turning to frown out the window, and Billy's gaze flicked after him, then back to Joyce, who was squinting at him, her arms hovering in midair. Billy's shoulders relaxed, a little.

"What?" Joyce asked, frowning from Steve's face to Hopper's back.

Max wandered over and lingered by the door with El, both of them looking torn.

"I can make it up to you," Billy told the wall behind Joyce. "I can replace the plate. I can—" he cut off, gasping a shuddery breath as Hopper turned to face them.

"You got a couple more boys on call if you have any chores need doing," Hopper said to Mrs. Byers, and Steve *willed* her to say that was fine. Billy tensed again every time Hopper talked, and Steve wanted to reach over and squeeze his hand even more than he wanted to *use a goddamn toilet*.

"Sorry we made a mess," he said quickly, trying to extract Billy, instead of thinking about his bladder. "We, um, there was a lot happening—"

Joyce Byers wasn't stupid, and her eyes were widening as she watched Billy twitch every time Hopper moved.

"You're...staying with Steve," she said again, looking over at Hopper, who nodded.

"It's fine," Steve told her, swallowing. "He and Will, um, they—they get on, they have—stuff to talk about," he said, clumsily trying not to mention what he was coming to think of as *the gay thing*, but Joyce Byers seemed to get something else out of his rambling, because she sat down across from them.

"Will doesn't have a lot of people he wants to talk to," she said, reaching toward Billy's hands on the table, then yanking her hands back and folding them together. "If—if he's found somebody that he has—things—in common—"

"Lonnie is a piece of work, but you got Will out of there," Hopper said, and Steve blinked, wondering who the hell that was. "Your kids got lucky."

"Oh, oh no," Joyce said, for whatever reason, and Steve couldn't take it anymore.

He stood up, squeezing Billy's shoulder. "We haveta go now," he said, unable to resist the call of his bladder, or return to the Byers' bathroom.

"You boys are welcome anytime," Joyce said, leaning to catch Billy's eye.

He frowned at her, but nodded. "Just tell me what you want me to

do,” he told her, and she leaned forward across the table, grabbing his hands.

“Honey,” she said, staring Billy down, “—you make my kid *way* too happy for me to care about a plate. Okay?” Her hands looked tiny and white against Billy’s big tanned ones. “You too, hon,” she said louder, frowning over at Max, who frowned warily. Joyce smiled a little sadly. “Have your mom give me a call, sweetie.”

Billy had kind of...frozen, and Steve kneed him in the side, hoping his engine would engage.

“Come on, trespasser, we’re going.”

“Come again next time,” Mrs. Byers said, squeezing Billy’s hands, and smiling up at Steve.

Steve, as ever when faced with somebody’s mom, fought down the urge to suggest they just *stay*. Probably Billy was a better cook than Jonathan. Steve was a better babysitter. *She probably doesn’t mean forever*, he told himself, smiling. *She didn’t mean ‘I’ll keep you’*. “Billy can make lasagna,” he said instead, and Billy glared up, his cheeks reddening. He hadn’t pulled his hands back from Mrs. Byers’, and Steve watched her pat them, like she had Will’s, after she took off his little snow-covered gloves.

Billy watched her hands with the weird blank look he got sometimes, and Steve leaned against his side, trying to remind him he was there.

“Everyone likes lasagna,” Mrs. Byers told Billy, and his eyes flicked back to her face. “Would it be evil of me to trade on my broken plate to get some lasagna?”

“No,” Max answered, from the door. “Billy, make Will’s mom some lasagna. You broke her plate.”

“He doesn’t *have* to!” Mrs. Byers protested, and Billy snorted a laugh, watching her hands again, and shooting a wary glance at Hopper.

“No, I—I can do that. Uh, Will likes it. Lasagna.”

“There!” Mrs. Byers squeezed Billy’s hands again, and looked over at

Hopper. “Aren’t I lucky he broke a plate? Now I get lasagna.”

Hopper shook his head, then met Steve’s eyes. He jerked his head at the door, smiling, and Steve sighed with relief.

“What’s lasagna,” El whispered to Max, sounding suspicious.

“Seriously,” Steve said, “—we need to go, uh, can we—I need to—”

“Oh, hey,” said Max. “Can you drop me close to my house? Like, a ways away—”

“We didn’t talk about—” El frowned at Hopper.

“I think we talked enough,” he said, nodding at Billy, who was letting Steve haul him to his feet, but hadn’t tried to pull away from Joyce Byers.

“Too many people here anyway,” said Max, rubbing her eyes, and El squeezed her hand.

“I will go with Max,” she told Hopper, who opened his mouth, narrowed his eyes at Max’s red-splotched face, and nodded.

“See you at home, kid,” he waved, then turned his glower on Steve and Billy. “Treat your cargo with care,” he said, and Joyce laughed.

Once they got outside, Steve took a deep breath. “Holy fucking *christ* I have to pee.”

Billy and Max both burst into snickers, white-faced and shiny-eyed, and Lucas hailed Max. El shoved Max towards Lucas, then turned to stop Billy with a hand on his chest.

“What do you need for skateboarding,” she asked, without it sounding like a question. “For Max.”

“Uh,” he blinked at her.

“When Max was sad once, you took her skateboarding. She liked it,” El told him, and he lowered his eyes, biting his lips.

“Really have to pee,” Steve hissed at them.

“It’s snowing,” Billy told El. “There’s nowhere—”

“So, a roof,” she said, unmoving, and crossed her arms.

“Uh,” Billy frowned, stroking his mustache. “There’s not much *around*. Even if we broke into the gym, it’s just a big empty room—”

“Nancy could break in again,” El said, folding her arms, and Billy blinked at her.

“The *princess* broke into the gym?” he asked, and Steve remembered he needed to sit his boyfriend down, sometime, and tell him the whole story.

Sometime his bladder wasn’t about to explode. “I’m about to make *yellow snow*,” Steve hissed, and Billy shoved his shoulder.

“Go in the bushes, your *majesty*, nobody’s watching!”

“What if *Mrs. Byers* sees my *dick*,” Steve asked, crossing his arms, but Billy pushed him again, so he stumbled off into the darkening twilight. He crouched in a bush, hoping he didn’t get poison ivy, and watched Billy and El talk seriously, both nodding, and looking over at Max.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you so much for wandering in! Lemme know if you liked my story--I lovelovelove hearing from people! Kudos! Short comments! Long comments! Questions! Constructive criticism! Comments as extra kudos! Thanks so, so much! XD (I try to reply to each one, but if you don't want a response to your comment then please say "No reply please" or "Whisper" so I'll know not to reply.)

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